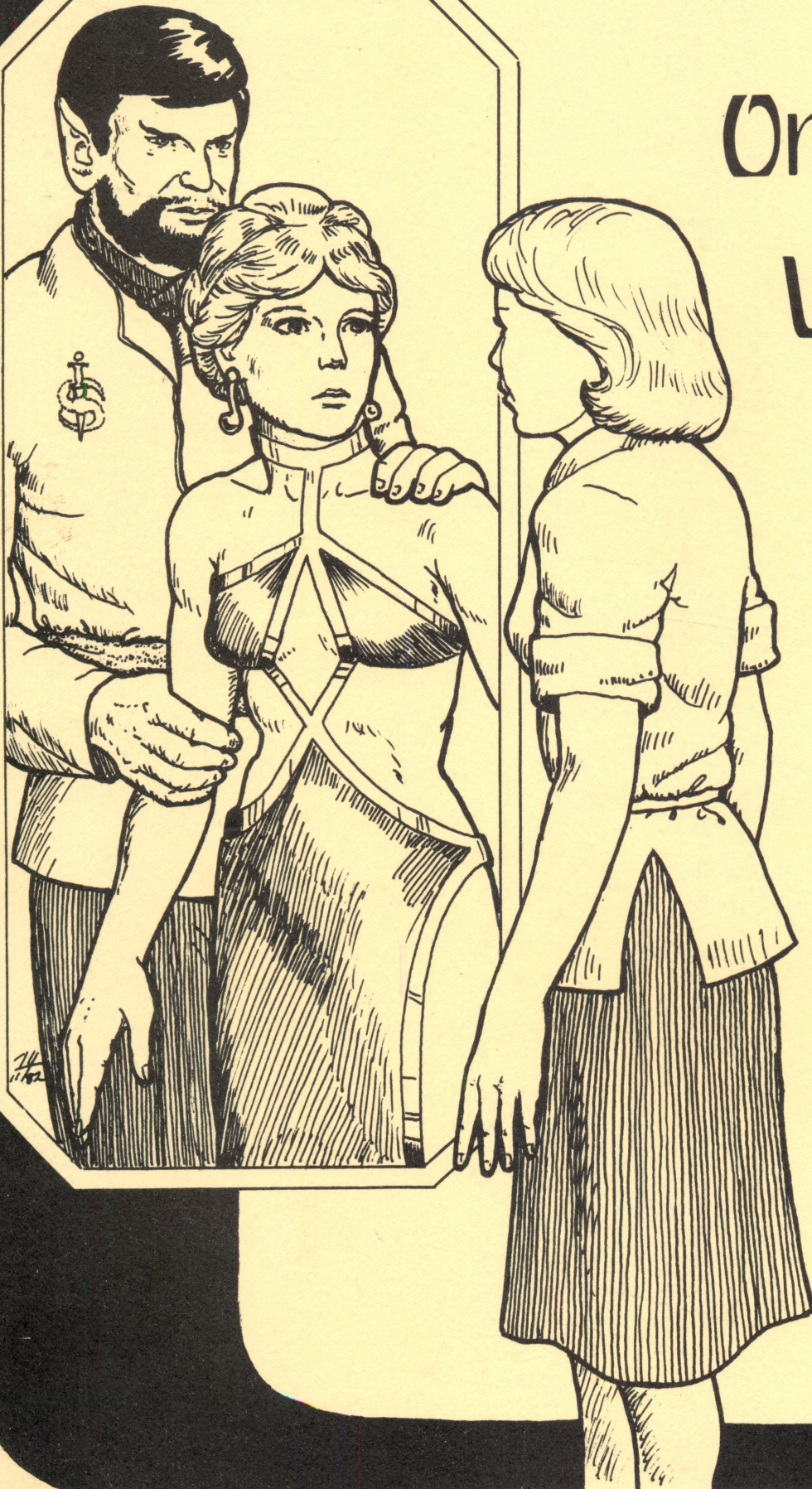


ONE  
WAY  
MIRROR

by

Barbara  
Wenk





# One Way Mirror

by

Barbara Wenk

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Edited by

Devra Michele Langsam



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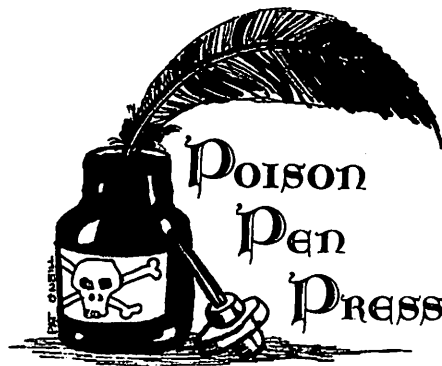
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# Editorial

## Maunderings

Barbara told me recently that no one *really* wants to read about the editor's trials with disappearing type fonts and lost pages. She added that the clever comments thought up during editing aren't funny out of context (not even the tank of piranhas masquerading as a tableful of hors d'oeuvres?) ["You can't fool me; I know a hard-boiled egg doesn't have that many teeth!"] and the people who deserve commemoration know it and don't need coy little reminders.

Therefore, I shall just say "Thank you" to the following people:

My sister Miriam Langsam, who read the manuscript, and gave us a fresh, non-fannish point of view,

Joyce Yasner and Anne Elizabeth Zeek, who put up with a year and a half of editorial maunderings and near-hysterics,

And, of course, Barbara, for telling me about Jenny in the first place.

--Devra Michele Langsam

*Mirrors should reflect a little  
before throwing back images.*

*--Jean Cocteau*

# Part One

Star Trek fan



*I know I said I wanted to go into space, Jenny thought wearily for the thousandth time, but not like this!*

Never like this. She didn't even know how long she'd been on board this space ship. Ever since she'd been grabbed by what turned out to be a group of alien slave traders, she'd been incarcerated in a bare cube of a cell scarcely the size of an elevator car. Except for unpleasant sessions with a hypnoteacher learning to speak what they called 'Standard', she'd been left strictly alone.

Neither impassioned pleading nor calm query elicited any answers from her human-looking captors. Jenny didn't count "shut up" as much of a response. As time wore on, this total solitude and lack of information had grown increasingly nerve-racking.

She sat on the floor of her cell, resting her arms on the hard, platformlike bed that was the only furnishing in the room. She had just gone through another of those horrible hypnosessions, and was suffering from the dull, pressing headache and sore toothfillings that always followed.

Jenny set her mouth firmly and carefully leaned her throbbing head on her arms. She closed her eyes to shut out the gray walls. Everything was bleak gray: the walls, the floor, the scanty tunic that was her only garment.

*Be careful what you wish for, Dad always says. You may get it. But I still don't consider wanting to explore the galaxy the equivalent of a desire to be abducted by alien slavers while I'm on vacation. This'll teach me not to go walking on lonely beaches . . .*

*Thank God the cats are home with my parents. But what they're going to think--and what's Isabel going to do when I'm not on that plane? Although for all she knew, given her complete lack of time references, it was now long past February, and all that had already happened. When she didn't arrive on that plane to New York, or turn up at the Commodore, poor Isabel was going to be--or already had been--frantic. She knew nothing normal would have kept Jenny from attending the last of the Committee's big STAR TREK conventions.*

Missing the convention was, somehow, the final unbearable straw. Jenny's eyes burned, but she didn't have the energy to cry. She'd done too much of that already.

As she rubbed her eyes, there was a fluctuation in the ship's gravity field. Jenny rose an inch or so off the floor, grabbed wildly at the platform, then jolted back with a thud. This added aggravation sent a stab of pain through her aching head.

"Oh, Jesus, now what?" She gripped the edge of the platform tightly with one hand, and pushed hair out of her eyes with the other. She remained sitting on the floor. It hardly seemed worth the effort to get up anymore.

Nothing else happened, and Jenny had just sighed and laid her head back on her arms, when she heard a noise outside her cell door. It was the first sound she had ever heard penetrate that barrier. She stared at the door, curiosity aroused. The determined noise continued, and her stomach contracted with a surge of excited, and, as she realized, completely unwarranted, hope.

There seemed to be a decided difference of opinion taking place out there, and Jenny felt any change in her situation could hardly be for the worse. She ignored the tiny, malicious voice in her mind that said, *Want to bet?*

"With any luck, it's a Galactic Patrol. Hell, at this point I'll settle for a space cop giving these creeps a speeding ticket." She pulled herself to her feet, yanked at the short, open-sided gray tunic--it was absolutely impossible to persuade the incredibly drafty thing to stay down past mid-thigh--and faced the door.

There was a short period of silence. Finally the cell door slid up. Jenny found herself facing three people--two bearded men wearing sleeveless red uniforms, and a woman with slanted eyebrows and pointed ears. The woman also wore a red uniform, complete with thigh-high black boots and a glittering gold sash. All of it right out of Jenny's favorite STAR TREK episode, "Mirror, Mirror".

*Oh, of course. I've gone crazy. What a relief.*

One of the red-clad men motioned at Jenny with his gun. "Out!" he snapped.

Jenny didn't--couldn't--move. *Besides, if I finally HAVE gone crazy, I'm safe. This can't hurt me. It's not real--*

The man took a long step toward her, clamped his hand on her arm, and gave a tug that sent her stumbling out into the corridor.

Jenny banged heavily into the opposite wall, losing her comforting feeling of safety-through-insanity with the painful impact. She stared at the woman's pointed ears and green-bronze complexion, then at the guns, the knives, and the almost-familiar uniforms. On the breast of each was a gleaming insignia: a galaxy pierced by a dagger.

*No. NO. This is ridiculous.* She rubbed her arm with a shaking hand.

The woman who looked like a Vulcan glanced at the man, her dark eyebrows raised.

"That's the lot," he said.

The second man shook his head. "Not much of a haul. Bet we don't get a cut this time."

"Quiet," the woman said. "Let's go. Move, you!"

Peaceful calm settled over Jenny. She had snapped past all other emotions into cold shock. "I don't think I like this," she said in a quiet, reasonable voice, automatically reverting to English. "I don't think I believe it. It's a bad, rotten joke. It must be."

The pointed-eared woman gave Jenny a disgusted look. One of the men, gun pointed unwaveringly at Jenny, gave her another shove. Jenny walked along the corridor with them, regarding them with detachment.

Her new captors steered Jenny into one of the slaver ship's holds. The hold was now occupied by the other beings who must have comprised the slavers' cargo. There were also numbers of people in the pseudo-STAR TREK uniforms.

Jenny moved to one side of the cargo hold and stood against the wall, arms wrapped tightly around herself. She couldn't take her eyes from the uniformed guards scattered around the large room. Those uniforms, those *people--*

"Vulcans," she said, voice flat and toneless. "Disposable security guards. 'Mirror, Mirror', of all episodes. I want to go *home*." Here she was, in a situation that was every STAR TREK fan's fondest dream come to life--with a charming little twist to it that sent dream spinning to nightmare. She shuddered convulsively, and half-fell to a seat on the nearest crate.

*I'm going to have screaming hysterics. I can't stand this.* But she couldn't, somehow, summon up the necessary emotion. Whatever was going on, she was going to *have* to stand it. "Oh, God," she said, and buried her face in her hands.

There was a drop in the level of businesslike noise. Jenny lifted her head to see what had happened *now*. The only thing she could see was the entrance of several people who were, judging from the salutes of the guards--direct from "Mirror, Mirror" again--high-ranking officers. Among the newcomers was a redheaded man whose sleeveless uniform vest was as golden as his sash. Beside him was a bearded Vulcan in yellow.

*NOT Kirk. NOT Spock-2. Thank God.* She felt a wash of giddy relief. She didn't think she could have taken that.

The officers surveyed the room for several minutes. Then the red-haired man--the captain, Jenny had decided from the golden uniform--turned to the Vulcan. The captain spoke to him briefly, then smiled, indicating the room with a wave of his hand. Then all the officers except the Vulcan left the cargo hold.

The Vulcan spent another few minutes scanning the occupants of the room. Jenny, wondering what he was looking for, stiffened as she suddenly realized that he was looking at her. Frozen, she stared back, wishing the whole situation weren't so horribly fascinating. After a moment, the Vulcan stopped staring at her and turned to leave the room.

Jenny let out her involuntarily held breath. Still tensed, she looked around the cargo hold. The only people in here now were the red-uniformed 'security guards' and the slavers' captives. The guards were wandering through the room, leering at the women and making entertainment suggestions that Jenny felt were, to put it mildly, crude.

*Please, please, don't let any of them look at me. Thank God I'm not that pretty.* Jenny cautiously rose and edged over to a woman standing nearby. Since the woman also wore a skimpy gray tunic, she should be safe to talk to. "Excuse me," Jenny said tentatively.

The other woman turned. Her eyes were puffy and there were tear-marks on her cheeks. "What is it?"

"Uh--I was just wondering--do you know what happens to us now?"

The woman looked at Jenny blankly. "We've been confiscated by an Imperial cruiser. What do *you* think happens? A welcome feast?" She looked from Jenny to the security men prowling the cargo hold, and gave a short laugh. "I don't know how they expect to get much of a price for us after we've been passed around for the crew's amusement, but that's not my problem."

Jenny swallowed hard. "Oh," she said in a small voice. She'd been sort of afraid that might be the answer.

The woman cast a sharp look at Jenny's face. "We're just damn lucky that bastard of a slave-runner didn't have time to dump us. Probably had to wipe their records first and didn't have a chance--"

Jenny stared at the woman in utter horror. Then, without even caring that she might be thought rude, she turned and went back to her seat on the crate. She felt very cold.

As she stared at the room, trying to think, she saw two of the security men detach themselves from a group by the main door and come in her direction. All her muscles tensed as they approached.

"*This* one?" one of the men said.

The other nodded. "Don't ask me why. She's not nearly as good-looking as some of the others. He's got strange taste, I guess."

"That figures. Hell, after the way he lost this round to the captain, I'm surprised he didn't just send that stiff-necked chief op of his to pick one."

They both laughed. The first man addressed Jenny, whose heartfelt request for invisibility had not been granted. "Come on, you."

Jenny's first instinctive reaction was to shrink back. *No! Why me?* At her hesitation, the man frowned and moved toward her. Jenny hastily stood.

She obediently accompanied the two men out of the cargo hold and back along the ship's corridors. Then they walked through what looked like a perfectly normal doorway and Jenny tried to stop dead and jump back at the same time.

One of the men jerked her forward. Jenny hardly noticed, her eyes drawn by endless blackness beneath her feet. It was a passageway, a short, *transparent* passageway. Jenny looked up. She could see the steely-blue curve of a hull. A passage. Between two space ships. This really *was* space. There was no room for nagging doubt when she could *see--*

She looked down again. *Endless stars and space. You could fall forever, forever--* She quickly fastened her gaze on the doorway at the far end of the passageway.

Once on the new ship, the guards led her to an elevator. After a short, silent ride, the doors slid open. Jenny walked out of the elevator and came to an instant, abrupt halt.

"Jesus H. Christ, it *is--*" Forgetting the guards' menace, she switched to the Standard she'd been taught. "Please, what ship is this?"

The guard clamped harsh fingers on her arm. "Welcome to the *Victory*. Now move, damn it."

*The VICTORY. 'An Imperial cruiser'. Right.* As Jenny walked between the two men, she looked around with stunned interest.

The worst thing was the uncanny familiarity of the scene. The curving corridor, the sliding doors, the colorful uniforms, were all those of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*.

More accurately, in view of the flashing gold and glitter, and the dagger-impaled galaxy symbol on walls and uniforms, the I.S.S. *Enterprise*.

And that was impossible.

As impossible as the people in "Mirror" universe uniforms who passed her. And not all of them were human, if she could believe her eyes--and their skin and ears. And--

As one of the men walking past stared at her and grinned, Jenny suddenly realized that she was far too scantily clad for her peace of



mind. She started trying to hold the gray tunic closed. At least it solved the problem of what to do with her hands.

After several long stretches of corridor, and another up-and-side-ways swoop in a turbolift, they started down another corridor--this one, Jenny discovered as she set her bare feet on it, thick-carpeted. A short walk around the curve of hallway, and her escort halted by a door. Two Vulcans in long-sleeved dark blue uniforms stood before it. There was a bright insignia of some sort on their tunics, but it wasn't the daggered galaxy.

"The commander sent for her," said one of her guards.

One of the Vulcans touched a small plate in the wall by the door. He spoke for a moment in a language Jenny couldn't understand.

*Probably Vulcan, you moron,* she thought numbly.

The door slid open. "Go on," the Vulcan told her. Jenny glanced around. The two security men who'd brought her here had faded off into the distance. The Vulcan gave her a hard stare.

She hesitated. *I know this script. Now they'll want to know all about Earth. This is crazy. I'm crazy. God, I hope I can keep my mouth shut.*

"Move," the Vulcan said.

There seemed no point in refusing merely to see what would happen. She stepped through the door. She stopped just inside as it slid closed behind her.

She was standing in a large room. Her first impressions were of blues, greens, and heat. Sitting at a wide desk was the yellow-uniformed Vulcan who'd been inspecting the cargo hold earlier. He looked up at her entrance, surveying her with cold, grey-yellow eyes.

Jenny tried to meet his gaze steadily. As his silent study continued, her face began prickling with embarrassment.

He finally leaned forward, placing his fingertips together. "Adequate." His voice was remote and disinterested.

Jenny was started into saying, "What?" More than half-expecting an unpleasant interrogation on Earth's location and defenses, she'd been trying to persuade herself that she'd rather die than tell them anything, which she was not at all sure that she would. Now she felt as if she'd missed her cue.

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I have a proposition to make to you."



She managed to say, "Oh?" The shakiness of her voice was mortifying. She wanted to sound completely calm and controlled. But since, as far as she could see, she was at the mercy of a group of fictional homicidal brigands, any 'proposition' was apt to be exceedingly disagreeable.

She thought he looked annoyed. "Will you accept a position as my lady?"

"What?" said Jenny. Confusion drove out some of her nervousness. "I don't--"

"I'm asking you to be my bedmate," he said impatiently. "An officer's lady."

*Oh, I see. Like Marlena-the-captain's-woman,* she thought, with initial relief at finding something, anything, about this situation that she could comprehend. *Huh? Now wait a minute, why--*

"Why me? I'm not beautiful." And why on earth was he bothering to ask? Surely he could just have had her dragged in, if he were that interested.

The Vulcan's mouth tightened. "Beautiful women can provide an officer with problems. I merely require a passably attractive female." He eyed her speculatively, then continued, "You also appear to be of a calm temperament. I do not wish this arrangement to inconvenience me unduly."



Jenny stared back at him, fighting a ghastly urge to laugh. *Of all the peculiar invitations--*

"Well?" There was absolutely no perceptible interest in his voice.

Jenny instantly lost that crazy impulse to giggle. "What happens to me if I say 'no'?"

He raised one black, slanted eyebrow. "You go back with the rest of the confiscated cargo. There are other choices available---for me."

Jenny clasped her hands and pressed her fingers hard against her mouth. This whole scene

was so unreal she'd lost some of her fear--until that last casually uttered phrase.

As this man had just so easily reminded her, he had other choices. She didn't. This was probably her best--her only--chance to avoid a short, messy future. Hopping into a stranger's bed wasn't the greatest idea she'd ever heard of. But it would, at least, be on an exclusive basis.

The real question was whether she could pull it off. It shouldn't be that difficult. Surely she knew more than enough about the STAR TREK setup to pass, if she only kept her mouth shut. And as for the rest--a consideration of the alternative should provide all the encouragement she'd need.

She looked at the Vulcan, then quickly closed her eyes. *Oh, God, what AM I doing here? Smile, Jen, isn't this every trekfan's young dream?*

"Well?" he said again. "Do you accept?"

She knew she wasn't going to get a second chance. Jenny opened her eyes and pulled her hands away from her mouth. She took a deep breath, her hands gripped together tightly. "Yes."

The Vulcan nodded. Then he returned his attention to the materials on his desk. Jenny stood uncomfortably, wondering what in God's name she was supposed to do now. The man seemed to have forgotten she was still there.

At his next remark, she wished he *had* forgotten.

"One thing more," he said. He did not look up. "Take that off."

Her first thought was, *What, NOW?* She could feel her face flaming. Then she thought, slowly, *I suppose he wants to see what he's getting. That makes sense.* But she still didn't move.

The Vulcan raised his head. Jenny stared at him. His face was expressionless. She knew hers was flushed.



She looked at the floor, took another deep breath, and gritted her teeth. The thought of being tossed to the ship's crew for rape and recreation vivid in her mind, she gathered the hem of the tunic in her hands, mentally counted to three, and yanked it off over her head. She let it drop to the floor, clenched her hands, digging her nails into her palms, and stared hard at the wall behind the Vulcan's head.

After one brief glance at her, he once again bent his head over his work.

*You BASTARD!* Jenny stooped to scoop up the tunic and jerked it back on. *You just wanted to see if I'd really do it!*

The surge of anger gave her enough nerve to say, "Do I get to know who you are? And now what?"

"I am Commander Slair. The third officer. And you stay here. One of my female operatives will provide you with more suitable clothing."

"I'm Jenny Marlowe," she offered. She had the unnerving conviction that this Commander Slair wasn't even interested enough to ask her name. Probably considered 'you' sufficient. "I'm from Earth--" *That's right, tell them everything. Some heroine you are!*

Then, despite the heat, she felt chilled. *Tell them what?* she thought bleakly. *You don't even know where you are now, let alone where home is.* They could put a complete spectrographic map of the galaxy in front of her and offer her a free, no-strings-attached first-class passage back, and she'd still be unable to pick out her planet. She'd only have a fifty percent chance of choosing the right spiral arm.

Commander Slair, paying no attention to her, had tapped the communications console on his desk and was talking into it in what Jenny had arbitrarily decided was 'Vulcan'.

"You're not even *interested* in where I'm from?" Jenny muttered under her breath.

He paused, looking back at her. "What does it matter? If there were anyone to ransom you back, you would have mentioned it before. You're obviously from one of the provincial outer systems--"

There was a very slight hint of question in his voice, and Jenny nodded. *Oh, how true. How very true.*

"--and I doubt you can seriously expect to do better than my offer."

Feeling increasingly awkward and embarrassed, Jenny stood watching him for several minutes. Nothing more was said, so she finally went to sit on a sort of daybed-couch against the far wall. Commander Slair remained totally occupied by whatever it was on his desk.

The couch was well-supplied with soft throw pillows. After a cautious glance at the Vulcan, Jenny shoved the pillows into a heap and

coiled up to study the room. She alternated glances around the room with attempts to figure out just how much like STAR TREK this crackpot setup was going to turn out to be. Particularly since she seemed to have fallen through the looking glass into "Mirror, Mirror".

No longer totally stunned, Jenny began an even more cautiously surreptitious study of Commander Slair. She'd been so flabbergasted when she'd walked in and been presented with his gracious offer that his appearance had hardly penetrated.

To her infinite relief, he bore no resemblance whatever--aside from slanted eyebrows and pointed ears--to Mr. Spock, or even to the "Mirror" Spock. Not only was his uniform 'command gold', rather than blue, but his thick black hair was not constrained by a traditional slicked-down Vulcan haircut.

*'Traditional haircut'? Jesus, Jenny, what are you using for brains? Traditional fiddlesticks!* If this was reality, these pointy-eared aliens probably weren't named 'Vulcans'. Fan traditions had nothing to do with this. Jenny stretched out a bit more comfortably and returned to her perusal of Commander Slair. He looked muscular, fortyish, and irritated. *See? Can't be a Vulcan. Vulcans never look irritated. . . .*

Leaning back on soft cushions was rather a mistake. Under the soothing combination of heat, quiet, and her first comfortable bed in God only knew how long, Jenny's eyes closed. She was drifting between sleep and consciousness when the swish of the door and a firm voice saying, "Yes, Commander?" jerked her awake.

Jenny sat up, groggy and surprised to see that she was indeed still looking at the cabin and the Vulcan. The new voice belonged to a Vulcan woman who had just entered. She wore a uniform in the same deep blue as the two guards outside the door.

Commander Slair had looked up. "Tavra--" He continued in that unknown language. As he spoke, the woman turned to look at Jenny.

It was at that point that Jenny decided to apply Occam's razor and call the language 'Vulcan' and the people with pointed ears 'Vulcans' until she learned otherwise. *I'll be damned if I'll call them 'the-people-who-look-like-Vulcans-but-aren't-really-called-that'. If it looks like a Vulcan, and talks like a Vulcan--*

Jenny stood, running her hand through her tousled hair, as the Vulcan woman walked over to her. Despite Tavra's eloquently expressionless face, Jenny was prepared to swear the other was surprised.

Tavra studied Jenny with dark, unreadable eyes. Flinging politeness to the winds, Jenny stared back. Tavra was several inches shorter, and looked at least twenty years older than Jenny's twenty-six. The Vulcan woman was compact, with a dark, almost bronzy complexion, and she had dark brown hair that was cut short.

"Tenaya's clothing should do," Tavra finally said. "For the time being."

Commander Slair nodded. "Turn her over to Tenaya, then. Make sure the doctor checks her out, as well." He turned to Jenny. "This is Tavra, my chief operative. Cause her any trouble and you'll regret it." To Tavra, he added, "Then I need you back here to go over those shipping reports for sector four."

"Yes, Commander. Come with me, lady."

"My name is Jenny Marlowe," Jenny said as she followed the other woman to the door. She could almost see Tavra's mind filing this information away in a file drawer labeled 'trivialities'.

Tavra led Jenny down the corridor to a door only a short distance from Commander Slair's cabin. There she turned Jenny over to Tenaya's care. Tenaya, much to Jenny's admiring surprise, was tall, slender, and bore a strong resemblance to a young Elizabeth Taylor. After one look at Tenaya's flawless face and gorgeous violet eyes, Jenny couldn't imagine why Commander Slair needed to pick on a total stranger for his bedtime entertainment.

"This is Jenny," Tavra said. "The commander's lady. He wishes you to provide her with some more appropriate clothing. And have the doctor clear her." Tenaya nodded. Tavra promptly left.

Tenaya took Jenny down to be poked at in sick bay, then led her back and had her try on clothes. The numb, fogged feeling had set in again, and Jenny was having difficulty concentrating. She simply nodded agreement to whatever Tenaya suggested. If all Tenaya wanted to give her was what Jenny thought looked like party clothes, that was fine. Anything.

Tenaya finally stopped thrusting peculiar garments at Jenny. Jenny thankfully took advantage of this to pull on the gray tunic again. At least it was familiar.

Tenaya regarded the small pile of clothes thoughtfully. Then she glanced at the closet, ran a hand through her ink-black curls, and turned to Jenny. "I really have very little that is appropriate. However, I can also give you a few plainer items." Tenaya pulled a duplicate of her deep blue uniform from the closet. "If you do not object, of course." Her voice sounded oddly diffident.

"Anything you say," said Jenny, anxious only to avoid having to discuss things. Besides, the uniform looked nine times more useful than those flowing, chiffron affairs.

After bundling the various items of apparel together, Tenaya escorted Jenny back to Commander Slair's quarters. After giving her a brief run-down on the esoteric workings of some of the door, light, and bathroom controls, Tenaya headed for the outer door.



"Hey, wait," said Jenny. "Please."

Tenaya halted. "What is it?"

"Well . . . what am I supposed to do now?" There was no one else in the rooms at the moment, and Jenny felt oddly forlorn at the prospect of being left alone. And Tenaya was the least forbidding person she'd met so far.

"I don't know," Tenaya said, on a note of mild surprise. "Wait until the commander wants you." The door slid shut behind her.

Jenny's mouth quivered. She shut her eyes painfully tight against the hot tears trying to leak out.

"Stop that!" she told herself sharply. She couldn't afford the relief of hysterics. If Commander Slair walked in, she'd wind up right back in a cell on the other ship. He had plainly indicated that he wanted someone calm, someone who wouldn't be any trouble.

Where was that numb, stunned feeling now that she needed it? She was wavering on the edge of hysteria, and no longer felt very calm. Or very controlled. "So fake it!" she said fiercely. "You'd *better*."

She began a cautious exploration of the cabin, walking around slowly, her hands clasped behind her back.

There were two spacious rooms, plus bathroom and closet areas. It seemed like an awfully large set of rooms for a space ship. RHIP, all right. Commander Slair must be one of the top-ranking officers. Jenny couldn't believe each crewmember had rooms like this. It was larger than her two-and-a-half-room apartment, for heaven's sake.

After a circuit of the main room, eyeing the exotic ornaments and artwork, she crossed to the door leading to the bedroom. That too was done in rich blues and greens. There were a couple of pieces of furniture of what looked like dark wood, and a large, low bed.

Wondering what the hell she was trying to prove to herself, Jenny took a timid step into the bedroom. There was neither firepot nor lytherette. There was, however, a charming collection of decorative knives on the far wall. Jenny took another step into the room, then backed up a pace and quickly went back to sit on the couch.

She stared around the room, feeling less and less able to cope with this. The whole thing was both too normal and too strange. Deep, rich colors and patterns, those alien decorations--and a perfectly prosaic STAR TREK viewscreen and computer outlet on that desk. The total effect was futuristic barbaric, with a strong orientally-medieval overlay . . .

Jenny rose abruptly to her feet. "You have the goddamnedest excuse for a mind I ever heard of. Prosaic computer-viewers. With all you've got to worry about? Good grief!" Her mind was trying for the easy way

out, fastening on trivia. *STAR TREK trivia*, she thought, choking back a sobbing giggle.

She began pacing in front of the couch, gnawing her fingernails. She almost wished someone would come in, before she decided she was either mad or dreaming, or both.

A stab of pain as she pulled a nail to the quick, combined with a rising feeling of ravenous hunger, put an end to that line of thought. *I never heard of a dream where you wound up with a bleeding hangnail, or a hunger-headache. So I guess this IS really happening*, she thought with resignation. It was becoming more and more difficult to keep her mind on important issues, too.

She went to look at the computer outlet. If it *was* a talking TREK computer, she could get some information. She was leaning to look at the controls when the main door opened. She jerked back, feeling oddly guilty.

Commander Slair stood just inside the door. The sight of his bearded, alien face brought further emotional conflict. Part of Jenny's mind insisted that this was very, very, *very* weird. But another part kept saying, *Yes, good set design, nice props, very nice, FANTASTIC makeup jobs . . .*

As she stared, Commander Slair walked over to the desk. She stepped back, wondering if she should say anything. Her mind instantly went blank.

Commander Slair ran a cold glance over her. "The captain has arranged for me to introduce you to the other ranking officers," he said. "Get dressed. And get rid of that slaver's tunic."

Jenny stood staring at the clothes Tenaya had given her. After several minutes, Commander Slair, with an attitude of totally-lost patience, thrust a mass of black-and-purple fabric into her hands. She retreated to the bathroom to try and get it on and fastened.

What the captain had arranged was a party. By the time Jenny had been introduced, in rapid succession, to the red-haired captain, whose name turned out to be Gellis len Ronan, to half a dozen officers in impressive uniforms, and to a bunch of women who seemed to belong with, or to, these officers, she could no longer summon up any reaction at all to anything. She couldn't seem to decide whether to be horrified or to start laughing.

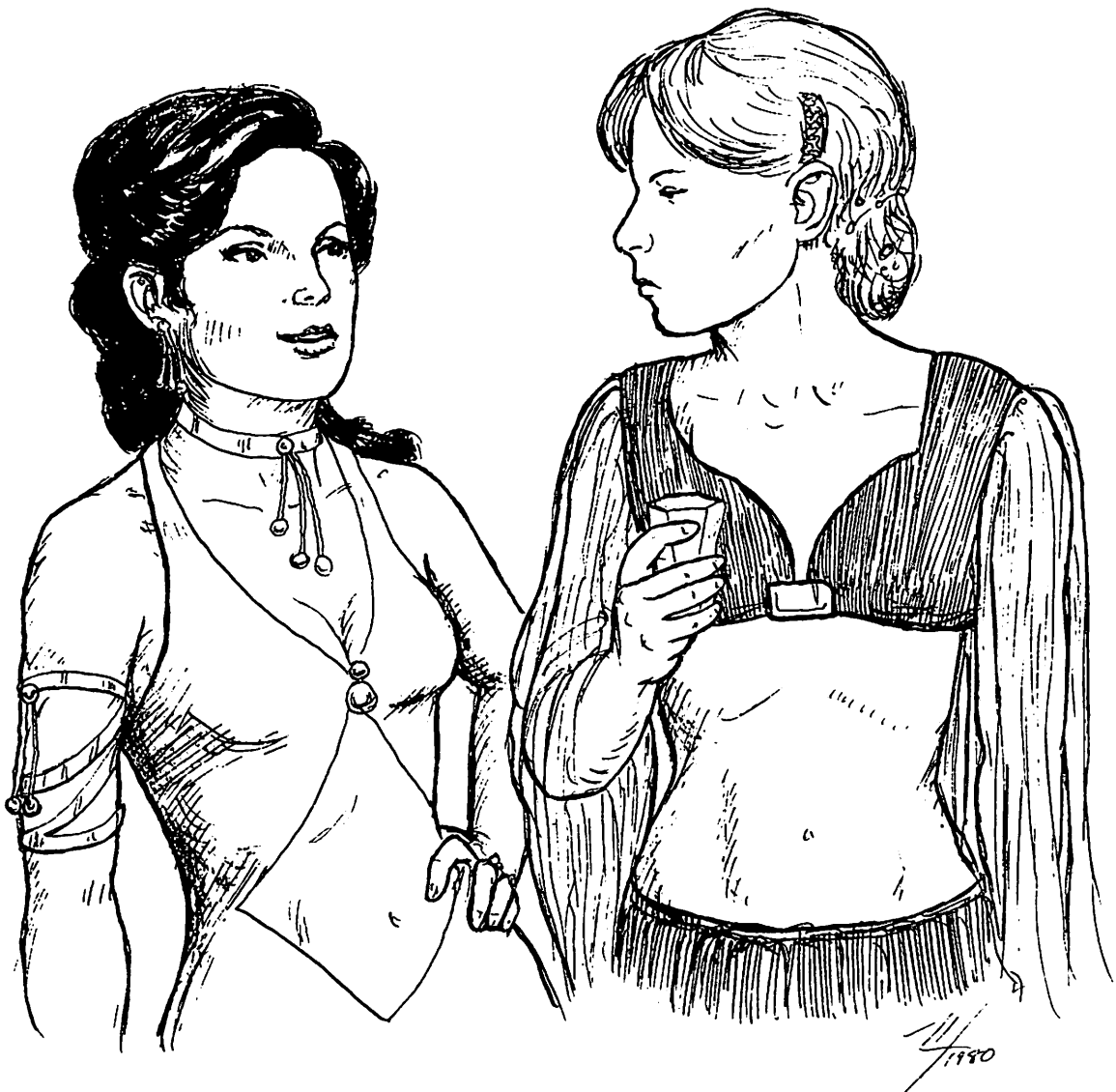
After he had presented Jenny to the others, Commander Slair walked off to talk to Captain len Ronan. Jenny scanned the room. She spotted a table. There didn't appear to be any food, but there were glasses of odd-colored drinks. Considering the episode she seemed to be in, they were unlikely to be fruit juice. She went over and picked up the first glass she saw.

The liquid inside was jade-green. At this point, Jenny didn't care if it were poisonous or not. She drained the glass in a few gulps. After a moment's consideration, she carefully placed the now empty glass back on the table and picked up another.

Under normal circumstances, Jenny had about two drinks in a year. By the time she was half-way through the second drink, a peculiar affair of orange-pink color and no appreciable taste, she no longer had any difficulty maintaining a facade of blasé composure. She was no longer either hungry or nervous.

Jenny turned back to face the room, assuming it were still there, and found herself confronting a small, glitteringly beautiful woman with a mass of glossy black hair. Her whole manner radiated arrogant assurance. Jenny managed to pull a name from her fogged mind. This was the captain's woman-- *Watch it, Jen, they call it 'lady' HERE.* The captain's lady, Aldith. She looked a right bitch.

Aldith looked up at Jenny, thinly masked scorn in her eyes. "So, Commander Slair chose someone. Finally. You must have interested him immensely." She looked pointedly at the outfit Jenny wore.



"I suppose you could say that," Jenny said, a frozen smile on her lips. "I wouldn't." She finished the second drink, irrationally annoyed by Aldith's comments. And of course clothes designed for a dark beauty like Tenaya looked like hell on someone who was neither. She'd never looked good in black and purple anyway.

Aldith looked somewhat taken aback by the lack of emotion in Jenny's response. "It must be quite a change for you," Aldith continued with malicious curiosity. "It's surely an unexpected honor for--"

--a *backwater hick like you*, Jenny finished silently. "Unexpected is right," she said to Aldith, in the same civil monotone. *Why won't you go away and leave me alone, you sleek cat?*

"Now, that's not fair," she said in English. "You *like* cats."

Aldith shot Jenny a sharp look. Jenny, smiling grimly, turned to pick up another drink. Her sole desire at this point was to crawl under the paint on the wall and stay there for the rest of her life.

She was beginning to feel rather as if she'd been shot full of novocaine. It was not a completely unpleasant sensation. *That's what comes of mixing drinks*, she thought fuzzily. She completely ignored Aldith's attempts at scratching comments until the woman apparently lost interest and wandered off, casting a perplexed glance back at Jenny.

Jenny lapsed back into English. "The hell with you, lady. I think I'm going to get drunk. That sounds like the logical thing to do." Maybe when she woke up, she'd be home.

People were eyeing her with curiosity, but, to her relief, no one else seemed about to try to talk to her right now. Jenny took another look around. This time she saw a table that was covered with what looked suspiciously like *hors d'oeuvres*.

*Food. Thank God.* Jenny went over, carefully collected a small plate of edibles of varying degrees of peculiarity, and went back to get a fourth drink.

As she turned to find a chair, she nearly bumped into a dark-skinned man in one of the gleaming yellow uniforms. She knew she'd been introduced to him, but she hadn't, at the moment, the slightest recollection of who the hell he was.

"Congratulations," he said, favoring her with one of those raking, appraising looks that were overly-common among these people. As Jenny stared at him, trying not to look as blank as she felt, he added with a nasty smile, "The captain really forced Commander Slair's hand with this party. You are lucky, aren't you?"

"Am I?" said Jenny, without comprehension. She wasn't even sure she was speaking in that 'Standard'. God only knew what those drinks were, but they certainly served their purpose admirably. She continued staring

at the man, trying to figure out how to extricate herself from the conversation.

After a moment, the man simply shrugged, picked up a drink, and walked away, much to Jenny's relief. She sat heavily on the nearest chair, studiously ignoring her surroundings. As she lifted her glass, with great care, to start on her fourth drink, she finally recalled the dark-skinned man's identity. That had been the ship's first officer.

*Right. Of course. I hope they all drop dead.* With that pious hope, Jenny devoted her attention to eating and drinking until Commander Slair reappeared to collect her. When he did, his manner was so carelessly casual it gave her a strong feeling of kinship with a bundle of laundry.

They returned to Commander Slair's quarters. There he continued on into the bedroom and Jenny walked unsteadily to the couch and collapsed on the cushions. Her head was spinning. All she wanted to do now was sleep for a week and wake in her own bed.

"I trust you do not intend to spend the night there."

Jenny sat up with a jerk. Commander Slair stood by the bedroom door. He had changed out of his uniform, and now wore only a dark blue robe, loosely tied at his waist.

Jenny slowly rose to her feet, suddenly far too sober. He obviously expected her to accompany him. She crossed reluctantly to the bedroom. There she paused in the doorway, rubbing her hands nervously over her arms. After one quick glance at Commander Slair, she dropped her gaze to the floor, swallowing to moisten her dry mouth.

It was one thing to spend long evenings in salacious talk of sex and starships and what you would do with a Vulcan if you had one, but this was a real man and a real bed. Jenny was suddenly afraid that theory wasn't nearly enough to get her through this. She had the sickening feeling she was about to make an awful fool of herself.

Commander Slair stood by the bed, looking at her with what she took to be impatience. Biting her lip, she walked over on unreliable legs. He pulled her against his chest and bent his head to kiss her--not roughly, but with no tenderness.

Jenny stiffened. Every instinct told her to pull away from this stranger.

Commander Slair released her, regarding her with slightly lifted brows. Then he lowered himself to the wide bed and lay propped on his elbows, watching her.

"Get undressed," he said, "and come here."

*This is it, kid,* Jenny thought miserably. *You thought it would be so easy, didn't you? You jerk.* Her hands went slowly to the fastenings

of the top of the flowing two-piece outfit she wore. After fumbling with the unfamiliar clasps, she peeled it off and let it drop to the floor. She automatically folded her arms over her breasts.

"Well?"

The lack of any apparent passion of any kind in the man's voice was daunting. Jenny didn't think she could move if her life depended upon it.

*How funny you should put it that way. It does.* With that grim thought, she began to unhook the skirt. Her fingers shook.

Commander Slair pushed himself to a sitting position. "Tantalizing preliminaries are unnecessary."

Jenny translated this into 'Don't take all night about getting undressed'. She tugged at the skirt and pushed it down over her hips. Stepping out of the pile of cloth, she moved to the side of the bed. She stood there uncertainly.

After a moment, Commander Slair's mouth tightened slightly. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her down beside him. He pressed her down on the bed, rolling partly across her and placing his mouth on hers.

In spite of the warmth of the room and the heat of his body, Jenny shivered. She went rigid under the pressure of his chest.

At her lack of response, he pushed back and looked down at her coldly. "I understood that you were willing. You agreed, did you not?" He paused. "If you have changed your mind--"

She shook her head.

"In that case, I do not desire an inanimate object in my bed." He slid his hand up her throat and gripped her chin, forcing her to look up at him. "Is that quite clear?"

"Perfectly," Jenny said tremulously. Cheeks burning, she added, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I haven't had much practice at this." It might be easier for him to overlook her incompetence than her reluctance. She was unhappily certain he was already annoyed.

To her surprise, Commander Slair released her and sat up. He ran his gaze over her. "You are joking."

She sat up herself, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around her legs. It gave her an illusion of covering. "Why should I be joking?"

"Do you mean to try to tell me that you are a virgin?" he said, in what sounded like astonishment.

Jenny couldn't tell whether to say 'yes' or 'no'. The true answer would probably be revealed by her general lack of talent in any case. It wasn't exactly the sort of thing you could bluff through. "Well . . ."



"At your age?"

Jenny swallowed annoyance and the remark that it was none of his business. She was afraid that he'd change his mind and withdraw his original offer. Unnerving as this situation was, it was a hell of a lot better than the alternative.

"You didn't say experience was required." It undoubtedly hadn't crossed his mind that a female over the age of twelve wouldn't already have ample experience in this field. *Well, damn it, he can just do some on-the-job training.*

"No. I did not." He regarded her with appraisal. "Remiss of me."

"Anyhow, I never heard that ignorance was an incurable condition," Jenny said defiantly. This conversation had become completely ridiculous. The surreal atmosphere was dissipating some of her embarrassed fear.

The corner of Commander Slair's mouth twitched upwards. "True." Untying his robe, he shrugged it from his shoulders.

Grasping Jenny's arm, he pulled her over to him. He slid his other hand behind her back, tightening his arm, bringing her close. His weight pushed her backward until she lay flat on the bed.

He moved his hands to her shoulders, pinning her with hands and body, and kissed her in a leisurely fashion. After a moment of awkward tension, Jenny, with a determined effort to relax, let her hands rest tentatively on his back.

*I wish he'd turn out the light.* But she was afraid to ask. As he moved a hand to her breast, she closed her eyes and tried to be cooperative.

By the next morning, most of the shock that had held Jenny in its chilly grip had disappeared. Nothing really dreadful had happened so far, after all. And it was physically impossible to stay at a high pitch of fear and tension forever. Since she was still alive, she felt more cheerful about the whole thing.

As she lay in bed, hands behind her head, she found it hard to imagine why she'd been quite so upset yesterday. She'd been *rescued*, for heaven's sake. If she was going to be stuck in an alien culture, at least she knew all about this one.

She cast a sidelong glance at Commander Slair, who was pulling on his yellow uniform. As for the price-- Well, last night hadn't imbued her with any great desire to do it again. But a fate worse than death?

*I WOULDN'T rather be dead, damn it! I'll get used to it. Millions have.* Besides, she didn't have to think about it again until tonight. That was a long way off. At least she'd managed to struggle through last



night without looking like a complete jerk. As far as she could tell, Commander Slair was a reasonably patient man, and all those drinks hadn't hurt either.

She didn't even have a hangover. Sometimes vice was its own reward.

Commander Slair knotted a glittering gold sash around his waist, and picked up a knife from the shelf by the bed. He slid the blade into the sheath on his boot. Without a word to Jenny, he headed for the door to the main room.

She pushed herself to her elbows. "Wait a minute! Please."

"What is it?"

"Uh--what do I do about breakfast? And--"

"Ask one of my operatives to show you where the officers' dining room is, of course."

"And then what am I supposed to do?"

"Whatever you like," he said, with a total lack of interest.

"Oh." Jenny felt a bit at a loss. She wouldn't say either of them had been carried away by passion or emotion last night, but still. . . .

She lay back on the pillow and watched him leave. Well, that was undoubtedly a Vulcan for you. She raised her eyebrows, shrugged, and then grinned. He'd just given her a *carte blanche* to do as she pleased.

There must be a lot of things for a trekfan to do on a starship. Resolutely ignoring all other matters and concentrating solely on that, Jenny rolled over and bounced out of bed. This whole setup was beginning, somehow, to seem increasingly funny.

After those disgusting sonics in that damn cell of hers, hot, abundant water was sheer sensuous joy. Jenny simply stood under the pouring water of the shower until a sharp reminder from her stomach finally sent her out to dry and dress, feeling really clean for the first time in what was probably weeks.

This time Jenny picked up the dark-blue uniform. Since the other couple of outfits Tenaya had provided yesterday appeared to be party or evening wear, and the few other items were definitely *not* adequate for anything other than the privacy of one's own bedroom, the uniform was the only appropriate thing to wear. Even if it hadn't been, how could she possibly resist the lure of that almost-TREK uniform, that dashing dagger she found in the pile of accessories, or those piratical thigh-high boots?

Surveying herself in the mirror after she figured out how the wrap-around uniform dress went on, Jenny grinned broadly. Oh, that looked

tearingly authentic. Even if it didn't have a bare midriff. Too bad she didn't have one of those shimmering golden sashes.

"You always were a sucker for glitter." She looked in the mirror again and began to giggle. "God, I wish Isabel were here to see this. Nobody'll ever *believe* it. Now, what do I do first?"

Cheerfully buoyant, she went into the main room and looked at the computer-viewer on the large desk. All she had to do was talk to it--or so she assumed. It contained the answers to all kinds of vital questions.

"Is there really a captain?" Jenny said, still grinning. "Does the *Enterprise* exist?" Her grin slowly faded. "And if it does exist, *why*?" Her fingers tightened on the edge of the desk.

*If I'm not crazy, and I'm afraid I'm not, why, why, WHY is this like a STAR TREK episode? WHY? What's going to happen to--*

The computer sat there, waiting. Jenny stared at it, shaken and a trifle queasy. *Later. Don't think about it now. Not now. Go eat.* She whirled around and went to the main door.

She stood there for a minute, her hand resting on the controls. "You can not do anything about it," she said slowly. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "You're on a starship. That's what you've wanted for ten years, isn't it? Well, go and enjoy it."

*And find out whatever you can. And keep your mouth SHUT.*

She pressed the button firmly, almost defiantly, and stepped through the doorway into the curving corridor.

After finding the dining room and eating, Jenny's spirits rose still further. She'd had no difficulty in obtaining a perfectly decent, if peculiar, breakfast, and the few people in the dining room hadn't come near her, thank God. This just proved, she decided, as she tried to figure out what she was eating and covertly stared at the starship personnel at the other tables, that you could get away with almost anything if you only kept quiet and copied the person ahead of you.

Upon leaving the dining room, she began exploratory prowling. She'd have to find a floor plan later, of course, but for now she couldn't resist this priceless opportunity.

She entered the first turbolift she saw. The door slid closed and the lift waited for her to direct it. She stared at the control-communicator, and automatically said, "Bridge." There was a split-second silence, and then a metallic voice said, "Clearance?"

Jenny jerked back. The voice repeated, "Clearance?"

"Never mind," she said hastily. "Uh-- Deck Six." Her first startlement gone, she realized it was just as well. She couldn't really imagine that Captain Whateverhisnamewas would be overjoyed to see her walk onto the bridge.

By a process of trial and error, she discovered that there was no Transporter Room--that request seemed to baffle the metallic voice--and that Engineering was also closed to her. That still left a lot of territory. It was a big ship.

It was, in fact, even larger than she'd thought. After the novelty of ordering a talking turbolift around and wandering curving corridors wore off, Jenny looked at her surroundings and came to the conclusion that she was lost.

Well, not lost, exactly. After all, she certainly couldn't get off the ship. But damn it, she should have some idea of where on the ship she was. *You'd think that after all those reruns I'd know the layout of this stupid ship by heart. How humiliating.*

Rounding a corner, she found herself in the same stretch of hallway she'd been in five minutes before. Or at least it had the dagger/galaxy on what looked like the same wallpanel. Here, that *was* a landmark--the first thing she'd noticed on her wanderings was that this Empire didn't feel compelled to stencil its insignia all over *everything*. They knew who they were.

*Now, let's see, when I came through the first time, where the hell-- Oh!*

A cat had just come around the curve of the hall and was padding in her direction. A real, live, *normal* brown tabby cat.

"Oh, *cat*," said Jenny, taking an impulsive step forward, her hand held out eagerly. "*Here*, cat. *Nice* cat."

The nice cat gave her a look of unutterable disdain and stalked past. Jenny reached to stroke it. "Here, pretty--"

The cat slid past her hands, dashed down the hall, leaped up to a small vent in the wall, and disappeared down it.

Jenny straightened and swallowed disappointment. She continued down the corridor, not even wondering what an Earth-normal cat was doing on an evil empire starship. By this time, she more than half-expected to see a large white rabbit hurry past at any minute, saying that it was late, oh, dear, yes, late.

Another few minutes of walking, and she was outside a room she was sure she had passed a little earlier. Or it at least had the same design by the open door. She looked in.

It appeared to be a rec room. There were round tables, chairs, and

assorted people sitting around. On the far wall was a collection of things that looked suspiciously like vending machines.

*I wonder how you get chicken sandwiches and coffee out of them? I'm thirsty. She hesitated outside the door. Oh, don't be silly. Nobody's the least interested in YOU. Go ahead. You might as well TRY getting a drink. I hope you don't need money for those things.*

She walked in and headed for the machines. She determinedly paid no attention to the people already in the room. *Damn it, why is walking into a room full of sitting people so dreadful? Even when you know perfectly well they couldn't possibly care less.* The fact that almost every man was bearded added an indefinable air of menace. She was feeling more unsure about this venture with each step.

"Where'd you come from?" said a voice just behind her.

Jenny jumped and spun around. One of the crewmen had come up behind her. He stood far too close. Jenny gave him the look of 'I-don't-know-you-go-away' disinterest and kept moving, keeping a wary eye on him.

Surprise appeared on the man's face. It quickly vanished. He glanced over to the men sitting at the nearest table and grinned. He took a step after her.

She automatically edged off, increasingly uneasy. A look around the room showed that everyone else was watching. Abandoning any lingering notion of trying to get a drink, she started back for the door. She put considerable effort into trying to look casual about it.

The crewman strolled along beside her. "One of the third's ops, are you?" he said, eyeing her borrowed uniform. "No wonder I haven't seen you before. Must be pretty dull, working with all those Vulcans. There's a lot more fun on this ship, if you know where to look." He turned again to the men at the table. "Right?"

Jenny set her mouth firmly and ignored him. Almost to the door. Then she'd be out of this.

One of the men at the table rose slowly to his feet. He strode past Jenny to lean casually across the doorway. His body effectively blocked her exit.

She was forced to halt. Eyeing the man in the doorway, she said, "Excuse me, please."

A nasty grin lit his bearded face. "What do you know, she can talk!"

Jenny shot an uncertain glance around the room. Aside from a few people absorbed in a card game, the rest of the men and women were watching. Their expressions indicated only mild interest.

"Hey, woman, I was talking to you," the first man said. He shoved Jenny's shoulder lightly. She took a step back, off-balance and slightly shocked. "She's not very friendly, is she, Larn?"

"Maybe she only likes Vulcans," one of the women called out. Several people laughed.

Fighting trapped panic, Jenny dropped her gaze and tried taking another step to the door. Maybe the man standing there would let her get by after all. He didn't move as she approached, and she stopped.

A third man moved to her side. "I don't think she likes our company. What's the matter, enlisted men not good enough for you?" He put his hand on her arm. Skin prickling, she jerked away. "If you don't like us, why don't you leave?" he suggested.

"He won't let me!" The second the words were out, Jenny knew she'd made a mistake--a bad one.

There was a moment of strange, tingling stillness. The bearded faces of the men surrounding her changed, hardening from amused curiosity to hunting sharpness. Jenny's stomach contracted and she could feel the pounding of her blood.

The trio moved toward her, forcing her to give ground to avoid contact. Her back touched the wall.

One of them made a lightning, swooping grab and had her knife in his hand. He held it out in front of her.

"Take it back--if you can."

Jenny stared at the blade of the knife. The weapon no longer struck her as dashing decorative, only as dangerously sharp. She looked at the three men, and then past them to the rest of the room's occupants. No one else had moved. To Jenny's horror, they were merely watching--with amusement.

Laughing, the man tossed the knife to the one they'd called Larn. Jenny made a convulsive move away from the wall, only to be jarred back by a heavy-handed shove. The knife-point pricked her neck. Larn pulled the blade very lightly across her throat.

She flinched, even as she thought, desperately, *Idiot! Don't move!*

Using the blade's point, Larn traced the line of her neck, then drew the edge down her throat.

"She just likes to play rough," said one of the others. He put his fist under Jenny's chin, pushing her head back, and leaned forward. Jenny knew he was going to kiss her. She also knew she should try to scream, but she'd lost control of her voice.

*None of those people'd help me anyway.* Feeling sick, she wondered just how far they'd go before they tired of their little game. She tried to twist her head away before the man could touch his mouth to hers. Where were the security guards?

"Are you out of your minds?" said a new voice. Jenny's tormentors drew back a bit, turning their attention to the speaker.

It was a man in a deep yellow-orange uniform, an odd black design on it in place of the dagger and galaxy. "Do you maniacs know who that is?" he continued, moving forward. "It's Commander Slair's new lady."

Most of the seated onlookers developed expressions of profound unease. Several of them rose from their seats and left the room.

"Her?" one of the men said, looking at Jenny blankly. Then he added, indignantly, "Well, how the hell were we to know?"

"You should have known. And you know now," the new man said. He looked at Jenny, who had gone limp with incredulous relief and was leaning on the wall for support.

The three men looked extremely uncomfortable. Larn held out the knife, hilt toward Jenny. "Your knife, lady." His tone was apologetic.

Jenny just looked at it. Larn finally let his arm fall to his side.

"I'd suggest you three get out of here," the man in yellow said quietly, with an appraising glance at Jenny. "I really would."

"But--"

"Maybe I can persuade her not to report this to Commander Slair."

"We'd appreciate it," Larn said in heartfelt tones. He cast an uneasy look at Jenny. "We didn't hurt her. Just a little fun, that's all. Damn it, she didn't *say* anything!"

The new man stared hard at Jenny for a second. Then he shrugged. "You three'd *better* appreciate it. It may be more work than I thought."

He and the other men exchanged meaningful glances. Larn turned back to face Jenny. She pressed flat against the wall, sliding her gaze hopefully to the man in yellow.

"Lady--" began Larn.

"Shut up, Larn," said the man in yellow. He took Jenny's knife from Larn, holding it out to her.

This time she took it, hand trembling, and returned it to its sheath in her boot.

The men stepped back, and the man in yellow indicated the door with an ultra-respectful wave of his hand.

"Please," Jenny said. "I'm lost. How do I get back to Commander Slair's rooms?" She hoped her voice didn't sound as quavery as she suspected it did.



"Permit me to escort you," the man said.

Surprised she could still walk, Jenny followed him out of the room. A nervous backward glance showed the three men staring after her. Jenny could feel their eyes on her until she followed her escort around a corner.

"Lucky I came in--wasn't it?" he said as they walked. "But if I hadn't been on duty at that party last night, I wouldn't have known you either. It can take a day or two for things to get around properly--as I'm sure you know."

"Thank you," said Jenny in a small voice.

He shot her a sidelong glance. "Are you planning to report this?"

"I--uh--" Jenny had a hideous vision of those three thugs lurking around to get back at her if she reported them.

"Would you consider forgetting it--this time?" He paused, then added, his voice flawlessly courteous, "You didn't, after all, say anything."

"Let's forget it," Jenny said. She knew she wouldn't forget that scene if she lived to be a hundred, which didn't seem very likely. She put her hand over the stinging scratch on her neck.

"That sounds like a good idea," he said. Some of the smooth civility faded from his tone. "In fact, I think you ought to forget it completely, along with the way to enlisted territory."

Jenny stared at him, her hand still at her throat.

"And *I* work for *len* Ronan." This time the edge of warning was sharp and unmistakable.

And confusing. Jenny finally said, "Oh."

There was no further conversation until they reached the corridor that led to Commander Slair's quarters. Her escort left her there. Sure the Vulcan guards were staring at her, Jenny walked slowly down the hall and thankfully entered the sanctuary of Commander Slair's rooms.

*Oh, thank God. Nobody's here.* She collapsed on the couch. Now that the pressure was gone, her muscles were trying to untense. Tremors ran down her arms.

She gripped the edge of the couch, trying to stop the shaking. Her mind kept rerunning that ghastly, gut-wrenching moment when those crewmen had realized she didn't know how to play. That she was afraid, and vulnerable.

Her breath was beginning to catch on sobs. But this was such a familiar ship. Where were the good guys? How could STAR TREK betray her like this?



She choked on an indrawn laughing sob, torn between tears and hysterical giggles. "Boy, Jenny, of all the *stupid* ideas you've ever had, that takes the cake. What did I ever, *ever*, do to deserve--" She looked at the knife nestled in her boot-top. Compressing her quivering lips, she yanked the knife out and threw it across the room. Not bothering to see where it landed, she flung herself down on the couch, burying her face in a pillow.

It was another in what was beginning to seem like an endless series of silent evenings. It was hard to believe it was only her fifth day aboard the *Victory*. It felt like forever.

It was possible, of course, that it wouldn't be nearly so boring if she only dared make more than the most timid of forays out of Commander Slair's rooms. But she'd learned caution from her first abortive attempt at exploration of the huge ship. This might be STAR TREK's Mirror image, but it was no daydream with Jenny Marlowe in the starring role. She seemed to be the most insignificant of extras, and they had notoriously short life expectancies.

*I don't think this is even a speaking part.* Jenny sighed and stretched out on the couch, determinedly leafing through one of the incomprehensible magazines she'd found when she'd explored Commander Slair's rooms more thoroughly. Even if she couldn't read them, they had pictures, and were better than nothing against the daunting silence.

On the first couple of days, she'd made shy efforts at conversation. These had met with a total lack of enthusiasm from Commander Slair. *When that man says he's not interested, he really means it. God only knows why he has me cluttering up the place all the time, just to have someone to sleep with occasionally.*

She'd given up trying to talk to him at all.

Her initial hopes of striking up an acquaintance with the beautiful Tenaya had also faded. Tenaya, who seemed to be approximately Jenny's age, had appeared, at the outset, not unsociable. But for some reason, Tenaya was no longer open to question or conversation. She was strangely reluctant to even talk to Jenny.

Tavra was too intimidating for words. Jenny didn't even consider trying to garner information or companionship from anyone else on this crazy ship. It was too damn risky.

*Probably just as well they all ignore me.* Even though she sometimes toyed with the idea that she'd become invisible and hadn't noticed. *Or I'm SURE they'd find out I'm faking it.* Maybe it wouldn't matter--but it was a chance she did not care to take.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back, let the magazine fall to her lap. Since the slavers hadn't bothered teaching her to read Standard, she was

stuck with using only what library voice tapes and computer information she could call up.

She'd been working on Empire history and culture for the past few days and was overwhelmed by the amount she didn't know. Talk about abysmal ignorance-- A one-hour television show left a lot to be desired as adequate preparation for masquerading as an Imperial citizen. It left gaps. Filling them wasn't easy.

After the first day, she'd pounced eagerly on the computer on Commander Slair's desk. However, she'd quickly discovered it was not a magic box of limitless information. Nor was it willing and eager to hand what it did contain to anyone who asked. *One more, just ONE more, 'classified' from that goddamned box and I rip its little computer body to shreds.*

Oh, it had condescended to tell her the names of ships of the Imperial Starfleet. Yes, there was an *Enterprise*. Jenny waited for the odd sense of shock to pass and asked about its personnel.

This got her nowhere. Not sure whether to be sorry about this or not, she asked for a listing of past officers. The computer riposted with a curt statement that she should try the records at Fleet Command.

Well, was there a Commander Spock anywhere? He was a Vulcan . . . No, she didn't know his ship, or his planetside assignment, identification code, or date of rank. The computer, after some prodding, grudgingly admitted there were Spocks in Starfleet.

No, no, she wanted to know about the Spock who was the son of Sarek and Amanda.

Information was not coded in that manner. She could almost hear a metallic "stupid" appended to that statement.

Pictures? What, of every Spock on the list? Personnel files were restricted and where was her clearance? With alarm, Jenny recalled that in "Mirror, Mirror" people seemed to spend half their time tracking computer use and quickly shut the uncooperative machine off. So much for STAR TREK.

After some nervous consideration of the problem, she'd simply had to assume that, while she should avoid actual computer use, calling up library tapes for the viewer was all right. Otherwise she wouldn't have been able to learn anything.

*Sure. Five days, and I've learned what? The people with gold sashes are officers. That I knew. The people with pointed ears are called Vulcans. That I guessed. Shit.*

Oh, yes, she also knew that for the most part, the uniforms matched those of "Mirror, Mirror". Men wore variations on Mirror-Kirk's uniform; women's uniforms duplicated that worn by Mirror-Uhura and Marlena Murreau. Vulcans got long sleeves and covered midriffs, probably to prevent frost-bite.

*And the people in uniforms that DON'T look like TREK are 'private operatives'. That wasn't much help either.*

She still hadn't the least idea *why* everything was TREK. The one thing of which she was relatively sure was that whatever the explanation, it was not time travel. If it were, this would be the *Terran* Empire, the language English, or Russian, or Chinese, and somewhere in the tapes she would find Earth history.

With the time travel theory eliminated, Jenny was totally at a loss for an explanation. Why STAR TREK? Why, out of seventy-nine episodes, "Mirror, Mirror"?

But this was becoming the least of her concerns. There were things she *had* to know that weren't mentioned on any of the library tapes she'd gotten yet. This was, as she so frequently reminded herself, a *real* spaceship. Their library wasn't set up for kindergarten. Nobody needed a basic book of etiquette, or a history of the Empire in words of one syllable.

There were also some things about these Vulcans that she'd damn well better find out. She almost wished she hadn't remembered one or two little items. It was bad enough coping with Commander Slair as it was. If there really were such a thing as *pon farr*-- The very thought gave Jenny icy nausea.

"Don't," she said suddenly, in English. "Haven't you got enough--" Commander Slair looked up from the work on his desk to eye her coldly. She ducked her head, muttering, "Creep," in the security of her own language.

*Stupid Vulcan. This whole ship is full of flaming fruitcakes. And the weirdest excuses for logical Vulcans--* Jenny poked another pillow behind her head, glancing down at the almost-transparent robe she wore. *I would dearly love to know what Tenaya was doing with this little, and I do mean little, number. She must be a secret nut. Oh well, at least it's cool.*

It was one of the brief and diaphanous garments that had been among the clothing Tenaya'd handed over that first day. They were cool, all right, being sheer and open at the sides. After the first day or so of the heat in these two rooms, Jenny had finally decided that physical comfort was more important than her now nonexistent respectability. So the thing was extremely revealing--what difference did it make? If she was this man's mistress, spending her nights sleeping naked in his bed, it was pretty silly to worry about being scantily dressed when sitting around his rooms.

It was particularly silly since, as far as she'd yet been able to determine, Commander Slair quite literally didn't notice her unless she was in his way or in his bed.

Jenny quietly sighed again and started another idle leaf-through of the Imperial equivalent of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. It was hard to summon

up the requisite fascination. The strange animals might just as easily be from Tasmania, the aliens from a good costume ball, and the scenery from a sound stage. She'd been calling every single thing she saw weird, alien, fascinating, and amazing for almost a week, and by now it was overkill. *Nothing* looked odd anymore.

*Well anyway, I think I've finally figured out some of the ship's schedule. Sort of. Maybe. Tomorrow I'm going to at least TRY to use that swimming pool. If I don't do SOMETHING, I'm going to go crazy. Crazier. Shit.*

There was an insistent beeping from the intercom on Commander Slair's desk. Jenny glanced up as he stretched out his hand to it and said, "Yes?"

It was undoubtedly only that chief operative of his, Tavra. To be on the safe side, Jenny swung her feet off the couch and stood up. She could just as easily sit and vegetate in the bedroom.

Commander Slair lifted one eyebrow as he listened to the intercom. His mouth seemed to tighten. "Of course, Captain. One moment." He rose and moved around the desk to stand facing the door.

If it was that cheerfully-sadistic looking captain, she was most definitely getting the hell out of here. As she moved past Commander Slair, he said, "Stay."

Jenny slowed, uncertain. "But I'm not dr--"

Commander Slair half-turned to her. "I said--" The door slid open and Captain Ien Ronan strolled into the room. "Yes, Captain? To what do I owe the unexpected honor of this visit?"

Captain Ien Ronan eyed Jenny and Commander Slair and smiled, not pleasantly. "Good evening, Commander. I gather you aren't finding compliance with accepted civilized standards as difficult as you had expected." His voice took on a hard edge. "Now that you *have* complied."

Ien Ronan's smile made Jenny acutely aware that she was practically naked. She began gradually edging around the Vulcan, heading for the privacy of the bedroom. Commander Slair put his hand on her shoulder, halting her.

She glanced up at his face quickly, rather startled. It was the first time he'd touched her when they weren't in bed.

"As you see, Captain," he said. "I have. I trust that you are satisfied?"

The captain and Commander Slair faced each other steadily. There was such a crackling sense of animosity in the air that Jenny forgot she'd wanted to leave because she wasn't dressed. This looked like the beginning of a truly nasty fight, and she wanted desperately to leave before she was caught in the fallout. At this point she'd have walked out into the corridor naked to get away from these two.



She tried sliding out from under the Vulcan's hand. He instantly tightened his fingers, clamping hard on her shoulder. The meaning was plain enough. She glanced at the captain, then back at Commander Slair. They were both still looking straight at each other.

The len Ronan broke the eye contact, hooking his hands on his sash and giving a brief laugh. He turned a considering gaze on Jenny. "I don't have to live with the results of your decisions, Commander." He lifted a sardonically mocking eyebrow, looking with slow deliberation from Jenny's bare feet up to her flaming face. "As long as *your* requirements are satisfied. . . ."

Jenny had never been so hideously embarrassed before in her entire life. Not even the first time she'd had to go to bed with Commander Slair. Damn it, *why* wouldn't he let her go? His hand was still closed, viselike, on her shoulder.

"As you see," Commander Slair repeated. "My requirements are not, perhaps, as difficult to meet as you seem to imagine."

"How very odd," the captain said softly. "You spent so much time over the selection of someone--suitable." Len Ronan took a step toward Jenny, who moved closer to Commander Slair, unable to take her eyes from the captain's face.

Len Ronan smiled at her, giving her another of those chillingly insulting looks. "A word of advise--lady. Don't be impulsive. Commander Slair isn't an impulsive man. He prefers to move--" He took another pace toward Jenny and Commander Slair.

"Carefully," Commander Slair said, his voice developing a cutting edge of its own. "Permit me to point out, Captain, that this matter is no longer in your province. I *have* bowed to the dictates of convention. Let that victory satisfy you."

"Oh, it does, Commander. It does. I'm not the fool your last captain seems to have been. I won't answer to Fleet for *your* little games." Len Ronan's pale eyes turned icy. "Be very careful what games you play on *my* ship, Commander. My crew's loyalties lie under *my* hand."

"I am aware. I do assure you, Captain, I have no intention of playing into your hands."

Jenny tore her gaze from the captain's face and shot a glance up at Commander Slair. The two men were staring at each other again, faces hard. Trapped between them, Jenny knew they were totally oblivious to her presence.

*They really hate each other.* The emotional charge between the two men was so high Jenny half-expected to see sparks. And beneath the open hostility were other incomprehensible undertones.

Len Ronan wasn't smiling now. "Nor I into yours, Vulcan. And don't forget it."

"Understood, Captain."

Len Ronan stepped back, turned and strode to the door. There he halted, looking at Jenny and Commander Slair again. "And Commander--do enjoy yourself. Perhaps your so-suitable lady also has a taste for games."

The door closed behind the captain. The tension vanished with the soft swish of the door, leaving the atmosphere normal once more.

"Good grief," Jenny whispered, staring at the door. Now what had that redheaded bastard meant by those snide and vicious remarks? If anything. As far as she could see, the captain had called for the sole purpose of throwing his weight around and acting like a true son-of-a-bitch to Commander Slair.

With that thought, she noticed she was practically pressed against the Vulcan's side. She shifted away. Commander Slair looked at her with a slight air of surprise, unclamped his fingers from her shoulder, and headed back toward his desk.

*"What a bastard," she said in English, rubbing her shoulder. As far as she was concerned, the description fit both captain and commander like a glove. Real sweethearts, the pair of them. I wonder why the commander hasn't assassinated the captain? Or vice versa?*

Commander Slair turned sharply. "Speak Standard. And that had better be the last time I have to tell you something twice. Arguments do not entertain me."

"W-what?" Jenny was taken aback by his vehemence, controlled but evident. The captain must have really infuriated him.

He took a long stride to stand directly in front of her. "I will admit you have so far caused me little inconvenience."

*Little incon--* For a second, sheer rage drove all other considerations from Jenny's mind. *Thanks so very much. This incredible condescension--*

"Do not begin now. If I tell you to stay--"

His voice cut through her anger, reminding her she couldn't afford that emotional luxury. Jenny unclenched her hands and tried to sound sweetly reasonable. "But I'm not--I wasn't--dressed."

"I'm not interested in your provincial notions of deportment. These are *my* quarters."

*Provincial?* Jenny tried desperately not to look as blatantly affronted as she felt. *PROVINCIAL?*

Commander Slair's mouth tightened. "And I have no intention of catering to out-world prudery."

"Prudery?" This accusation left her almost speechless.

"While you are in my employ, adapt your behavior accordingly." Commander Slair sounded almost exasperated. He went to his desk and put his hand on the desktop. The motion was not quite a slap, the stone of his heavy ring flashing ruby under the light. "Now shut up."

Jenny clamped her lips together. *Of all the arrogant, high-handed-- Just who the hell does he think he is, anyway?* Her mind shied away from the logical answer: he was the person who owned her. And if she didn't like it, she could try walking home.

Jenny woke up the next day with a faintly nagging headache. It was late in the morning, which meant she was alone in Commander Slair's rooms. She took advantage of the solitude to sprawl more comfortably over the wide bed, and closed her eyes again. Spending nights trying to stay as far away from your sleeping-partner as possible without actually falling off the bed was *not* restful.

As far as she was concerned, Commander Slair had two grave failings as a bed companion. For one thing, he was a light sleeper. Normally she would never have noticed this, since she most emphatically wasn't. But what with one thing and another, she hadn't been sleeping well for a long time, and when she moved, the commander had a nasty habit of waking up and demanding to know what she was doing. He also monopolized the center of the bed, apparently not being either accustomed to or interested in sharing the space.

All things considered, she'd have been better off sleeping on the couch. Or even the floor, a thought that had crossed her mind more than once. To Jenny's mind, the joys of sleeping with a Vulcan had been highly overrated.

She stretched luxuriously, and discovered in the process that her shoulder hurt. "Oh, shit." She touched the sore spot gingerly. That man didn't know his own strength. Or didn't care.

*I wonder why the hell all those stupid Gothics think livid bruises are so damn romantic?* Jenny rolled onto her stomach, rested her chin on her hands, and stared down at the deep-blue-carpeted floor. *Damn room's like being under water. Blue, to match my mood.*

No one here would even begin to understand that feeble excuse for a joke. Jenny lay absently kicking the edge of the bed. She felt strangely detached from her surroundings.

When she found herself semi-seriously wondering whether, if she could only find an exit hatch and get it open, she wouldn't *really* find herself stepping onto nice solid earth, Jenny said, "No, damn it!" and rolled onto the floor. "Let's not make this any more ridiculous than it already is. Don't just sit there, *do something. Anything.*"



She pushed herself up off the floor and turned to the bathroom. To hell with study. To double hell with that computer. "Classified, restricted. Can't the bloody thing say anything else? I'm going swimming."

The corridors Jenny traveled were almost empty. The gym area seemed equally empty. In the changing room, Jenny heaved a sigh of relief. *See? Don't be such a coward, you idiot!*

She glanced around the changing room, pulled off her clothes, and then hesitated. From her previous check out of the pool, she knew these Imperials didn't go in for swimsuits. She knew it, but she didn't quite *believe* it. Undoubtedly her provincialism showing again. Well, she could always wear her underclothes, what little there was of them. It would probably look damn odd to anyone who came in, though. . . .

Jenny was staring at her clothes, biting her lower lip, when someone wandered into the changing room from the pool. Jenny turned quickly at the other's entrance, grabbing for her clothes. This *was* the women's area, but they had some peculiar habits around here.

The woman halted, pulling off the cap that was the only thing she wore besides a thin film of pool-water. Pale hair the color of raw silk cascaded down her back, a striking contrast to the rich brown of her skin. She saw Jenny, who was watching her with resigned envy, and tilted her head.

"Well, well, well," said the woman, studying Jenny with eyes as pale as her hair. "If it isn't the third officer's elusive lady. And still in one piece, too. You *are* talented. Or are you lucky?"

Jenny let her clothing drop back to the bench. After years of sharing crowded hotel rooms at cons, she had few qualms about nudity among her own sex. *Good thing, too--I can at least act normal. And I guess I'd better forget about swimming in anything but skin.*

Still eyeing Jenny, the woman developed a malicious smile, and nodded slightly, as if in confirmation. "Enjoying yourself . . . officer's lady?"

Following the other's gaze, Jenny angled her head to glance at the bruise on her shoulder. To her annoyance, she knew she was blushing. She looked across at the woman and the past week's worth of unrelieved anger and frustration congealed. She smiled back, feeling positively vicious. "I'm *tired* of being polite," she said in English. "And I don't have to be polite to *you*, now do I?"

The woman's expression turned condescending. "Surely even an outlander like you can speak Imperial Standard."

"I can," Jenny said. "But I'm not sure I want to. And I don't remember *your* name *either*."

The condescension faded from the other's dark, beautifully-molded face, and she smiled. "Marudy Tam. Chief engineer's."

"You're the chief engineer?" That didn't sound right at all, somehow.

"Do I look like a working officer?" demanded Marudy Tam, indignation evident in every line of her body.

"No," said Jenny hastily. "No." So much for her attempt to be just as bitchy as Marudy Tam. She'd had the distinct and nasty impression the other'd been about to pounce at her.

Marudy Tam stalked over to the lockers lining the wall. She set her thumb on the colored circle in the middle of a door and the door opened.

*So that's how they open. I wonder if I can get a locker too. Somebody would probably steal her--Tenaya's, rather--clothes if she didn't.*

Ignoring Jenny, Marudy Tam dried herself off, then pulled out a jeweled dagger in an elaborately inlaid sheath and promptly strapped it around her thigh. She picked up a hairbrush and turned back to face Jenny.

"So the great Commander Slair has saddled himself with a hotblooded rustic out of a slaver's cargo. That's really funny." Marudy Tam began brushing out her long hair, eyes fixed on Jenny. "I trust the commander sees the humor? Oh well, perhaps not."



Jenny picked up her dress to give herself something to do with her hands. She was more than half tempted to get dressed again. Bewildered by the other's uncalled for hostility, she was miserably aware that anyone with any pretensions to character would simply slay this Marudy Tam person verbally and then leave.

Marudy Tam shrugged her elegant shoulders. "Maybe that will teach that Vulcan he can't play those tricks of his with len Ronan." She laughed, with another pointed, slanting glance at Jenny. "Not and win, anyway."

Jenny's eyes narrowed. Information! "Uh, excuse me-- Marudy Tam?"

"Yes?" Marudy Tam started braiding up her pale hair.

There was so much Jenny wanted to know, and so much she was trying to conceal, that she didn't know where to start. "Commander Slair and the captain are--well, from what I've seen, they don't like each other very--"

"Oh, you noticed?" Marudy Tam raised her blond eyebrows delicately and continued working on her hair, weaving a jeweled chain into the braid.

Jenny was jolted into saying the first thing that came into her head. "Why on earth hasn't the commander assassinated the captain? I thought--"

Marudy Tam looked at her in astonishment, and then laughed. "The things people believe about the Fleet--!" She shook her head.

*Well, so much for the accuracy of "Mirror, Mirror". No, wait. She could hear Chekov's voice now-- 'So you die, Captain, and we all move up in rank. No one will question the disappearance of a captain who has disobeyed Prime Orders of the Empire.'*

*He didn't say, 'No one will question the disappearance of a captain'!* So. She had that much now, at least. Hate or no hate, neither captain nor commander had yet made an error that would leave them open to unquestioned murder.

Marudy Tam stopped laughing. Her dark face was alight with amusement. "Don't people realize that officers cost the Empire money?"

Jenny smiled back, tentatively. "I heard advancement was by assassination."

"Now *that's* an insane notion if ever I heard one," Marudy Tam said. "That old story probably blew up out of the *Intrepid* incident."

"What incident?" said Jenny, watching Marudy Tam warily. *Now* the woman was perfectly amiable and willing to talk.

"I don't really know all the details. That was years ago, anyway. As I recall, a couple of the lower officers got impatient for promotion and managed to take out their superiors on some trumped-up excuse." Marudy Tam stepped into her dress and began fastening a row of elaborate hooks down the side.

"And?" Jenny prompted after a moment.

"Oh, Fleet Command held executions for weeks. I watched the tapes once. They were really inventive."

"Jesus." Jenny'd done enough reading on Nazi Germany's unsavory history to fully appreciate that simple statement.

"Tell me, what are you going to do now?" Marudy Tam's voice held only normal curiosity. "There's going to be a duel--some moron of a junior lieutenant was fool enough to pick a quarrel with Chief Lieutenant Suddreth and make it stick. Want to come?"

"No," said Jenny quickly. She added, automatically, "Thank you. No."

Marudy Tam shrugged one sleek brown shoulder. "Please yourself. But nobody sees you anywhere. Commander Slair chaining you to the wall?" The sweet venom was back in her voice and smile. "Understandable, under the circumstances, but rather--restrictive."

The sudden twists in the other's attitude were baffling Jenny. "Marudy Tam, will you please tell me what you're talking about? You're the chief engineer's woman, so you must know--"

Marudy Tam spun around, face furious. "You'd better watch your step, *commander's lady*. If you think your move up gives you the freedom to indulge yourself, you're *wrong*."

Jenny backed into the bench, stunned. *These people are all crazy. All of them! I'm trapped in a space-going insane asylum--*

"Because Commander Slair won't back *you*. The whole ship knows that. Even *you* should know it." Marudy Tam snatched up her hairbrush and hurled it at Jenny.

Jenny dodged, not quite fast enough, flinging her hand up to ward off the missile. The brush cracked sharply against her wrist and bounced back to fall to the floor several feet away.

"So keep a civil tongue in your head, you jumped-up bitch!" Marudy Tam sidestepped to scoop up her brush, tossed it into her locker and slammed the door shut, and stalked out of the room.

Jenny stared after her, frozen with astonished shock, hand still outstretched to block. Slowly, she lowered her arm, looking at her smarting wrist. *Every time I think I'm getting somewhere-- I can't understand a word they say, it just doesn't make any SENSE, everything I try to do, wrong, wrong, wrong--*

"Oh, don't start crying again!" she snapped crossly at herself. She held her wrist tightly, took a deep breath, and counted slowly to ten.

She had two choices. She could duck back to the security of Commander Slair's quarters. Or she could grit her teeth and go swimming. Having gotten this far, it would be a real pity if she let that Marudy Tam person spoil it. Jenny had a strong suspicion that if she lost her nerve now, she'd never again try anything else.

Well, since the pool area was now deserted . . . Jenny dumped her clothes in what she hoped was an unobtrusive pile of the end of the bench. She wrapped her towel around her, took another deep breath, and headed for the pool.

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During the next few days, Jenny worked out a quiet routine. She woke late, went swimming, and spent most of the rest of the time in Commander Slair's rooms, trying to make some sense out of the alien society into which she'd stumbled. After her first experiences, she tried to time her ventures out to avoid meeting any more of this ship's eccentric inhabitants than necessary.

It was beginning to be a very lonely existence. She was also beginning to suffer from excruciating boredom.

Jenny lay flat on the bed, staring at the ceiling. She'd already gone swimming and had absolutely nothing else she wanted to do. She was trying, in an absent-minded way, to figure out precisely how long she'd been living like this. If she counted the day the slave-ship had been impounded as Sunday. . . .

*And that was the day of the party and I got drunk. So then it was 'Monday' that I made a fool of myself in that rec room. She frowned, trying to count. The so-dear captain came by on 'Wednesday', God alone knows why. 'Thursday' that woman threw a hairbrush at me. That was three days ago.*

She sat up with a start. "One week? *One week?* I don't believe it!" It had to be far longer than that. She recounted, more carefully, but it still came out to no more than eight days--eight long, horrible days.

Sheer boredom was beginning to cancel out her fear. *Damn it, I shouldn't BE bored! A whole shiny-new interstellar empire to learn about, a real starship to live on, and you have the NERVE to be bored!*

But she was. There was just too much for her to absorb, and there was no one to act as guide. She was trying to learn, but wrestling information out of the computer took forever when you didn't know what to ask. She dutifully listened to library tapes for a few hours each day, but at least half the time she hadn't the least idea what they were talking about. And once she tired of that, she had nothing to do for the rest of the day.

*What the HELL am I supposed to do all day--tat antimacassars?* To her surprise, she hadn't been required to do anything at all except sleep with Commander Slair. This did not occupy an entire day. Or night.

The only other occupation available was thinking about home, and that she would not allow herself to do.

Sighing, Jenny slid her hands up her neck, pushing her hair off her damp skin. "It's too damn hot in here." She was becoming accustomed to the heat, but it was still an annoyance, particularly since, unwilling to risk another embarrassing run-in with stray visitors to Commander Slair's rooms, she was what passed for fully dressed.

Letting her hair fall, she said, "Shit," in a resigned tone. She pushed irritably at the strands trying to coil into her mouth. She'd neglected to get it cut before she'd started that ill-starred vacation of hers, and her light-brownish hair had reached an all-too-familiar stage. It was too short to put up and too long to be convenient or cool.

It was at this point that she usually abandoned her sporadic efforts to cultivate a waist-length mane and had it chopped off. *Too bad my hairdresser's six billion miles away.*

"Aha!" Jenny said, suddenly inspired. She was positive she'd seen something very like a pair of scissors on the desk in the main room. If they were out in the open, she didn't have to wonder whether or not it was all right to use them. She'd very quickly discovered that anything she wasn't permitted to touch, use, or investigate was under a hand or voice lock. Probably this was merely the commander's normal paranoid procedure.

Jenny swung off the bed. If those things were really scissors-- *Oh, come on, Jen, what else could they be? So they don't look alien-- how many ways ARE there to design scissors?* All right, if they were scissors, she could at least cut her hair. Just evening up the ends once she'd cut it could keep her amused for hours.

Cutting her hair wasn't quite the simple task she'd hoped. But when she studied the results later, Jenny wasn't too unhappy with the outcome. In fact, it didn't look bad at all.

"That's better," she informed her reflection firmly. If Commander Slair noticed the change, which she doubted, he'd probably decide she was behaving in a nice, logical manner. Cooler and neater was logical, wasn't it?

It was then, of course, necessary to clean up the bathroom, shower off stray bits of hair, and get dressed again, since she'd actually had the brains to take off her clothes before starting the hair-cutting project. *Damn good thing, too,* she thought as she refastened the black-and-purple top. *JUST what I'd need--one-third of my wardrobe covered with hair.*

Dressed once more, she went to place the scissors precisely where they'd been on the desk. Feeling moderately smug and creative about her achievement with her hair, she settled down at the desk to listen to some more tapes.

Late in the afternoon, the door slid open and Commander Slair entered. Jenny promptly flipped off the viewer and stood up. She moved around the desk and headed for her usual seat on the couch.

Commander Slair stared at her. His mouth tightened. Then he took a long stride toward her, raised his arm, and slammed his hand across her face. The blow sent her staggering back against the desk.

He eyed her coldly for a moment, and then continued on into the bedroom. Jenny stood clinging to the desk, tears in her eyes, too shocked to move.

Then she lifted a tentative, shaking hand to her numb cheek. *Why? Dear God, WHY?* Commander Slair had shown no previous fondness for gratuitous violence.

Pain spread across her face as the numbness faded. Her neck was already stiffening, and she knew she was going to have a colossal bruise. Her immediate thought was, *Cold compresses. Fast.*

This thought combined with an urgent desire to put as much distance between the Vulcan and herself as possible. Whatever was wrong, she had no intention of waiting for further exhibitions of his temper. She sure wasn't going to stay around here.

The only other place she could think of was the gym area. She knew that had cold water available. The main duty shift was just ending, too,



and most of the crew should be going to eat. There shouldn't be anyone in the gym to bother her.

Jenny moved unsteadily to the door, her head starting to ache. A sound from the bedroom sent her hastily out into the corridor. She ignored the glances from the two guards, walking as calmly as she could until she was out of their sight.

To her intense relief, the gym area was deserted. Jenny made her way to the sinks and ran cold water over her hands and face, letting herself cry now that the water would hide the tears.

Leaning heavily on the sink, she looked hopelessly at herself in the mirror. *Why?* And he'd been so damn casual about it. That was more of a shock than the actual pain.

*What am I going to do now?* The only answer was bitter. Nothing. If Commander Slair had developed a fancy to hit her every time he walked in, she'd have to either take it or learn to duck. No alternative--

"Oh, you do have one other alternative," Jenny said, staring grimly at her reflection. "Stand up for yourself, Jenny. Tell him you won't put up with it. And he'll say 'Fine' and toss you to the crew."

She buried her wet face in her hands. That was no choice at all.

A noise behind her made her jerk her head up and turn. Tavra stood in the doorway, regarding her with an almost startled expression. Jenny made a quick, futile attempt to wipe away tears and stared back at the Vulcan woman with wary hostility.

Tavra took a step into the room. Her dark eyebrows rose. "What have you done to your hair?"

"My--? I cut it." What did it look like she'd done to it? "Why?" Jenny was afraid her effort to sound moderately civil wasn't too successful.

"You cut it. Has the commander seen you yet?"

"I suppose so," Jenny said, touching her fingers to her cheek. Damn it, she was going to start crying again any second.

"Tell me--what did he say?" Tavra's voice was soft.

"Nothing," said Jenny bitterly. "He didn't seem particularly interested in conversation. That-- He didn't say *anything*. He just walked in and *hit* me! For no reason at all! He must be--"

"No reason?" Tavra raised one eloquent eyebrow. She gestured at Jenny's head. "You cannot have assumed he would be pleased."

"The hair?" Jenny shoved her fingers through her bangs, pushing them to the side. "Why should he care? Besides, it's neater. Isn't that more logical?"



"You decided you did not require the commander's permission for this alteration in your appearance," Tavra said in a flat tone. "I don't believe it."

"It's my hair," Jenny said.

"But you're employed as his lady." There was a scornful slant to Tavra's brow. "And you pretend to wonder that he struck you? You should be exceeding grateful he exercised such restraint. After the day he's had, I'm surprised he didn't beat you senseless for this trick."

"*Restraint?*" said Jenny in angry amazement. "Hitting people's *wrong.*"

Tavra stared at her for a second. The Vulcan's face took on a shuttered, guarded look. She surveyed Jenny with slow care.

Jenny didn't like that examination at all. Company had plainly been a rotten idea. Where she could go now she wasn't sure, but anywhere away from pseudo-Vulcans would do just fine.

"Lady," Tavra said, "where is your knife?"

"Knife?" Jenny hadn't worn that pretty, pointed blade since the day it had been held to her own throat.

"Why are you not wearing it?" Tavra's eyes had narrowed.

"In the first place," said Jenny, wishing she weren't already backed up against the sink, "I wasn't going to do something as stupid as hunt for it with the commander in that kind of mood. In the second--"

"So he does not know you left his quarters--and unarmed." It was more a statement than a question.

"Stay around to see if he happened to feel like hitting me again?" said Jenny. "Are you crazy?"

"Do you know, lady, I believe we may have miscalculated." Tavra's dark eyes were fixed on Jenny's now-apprehensive face. "Perhaps not enough attention has been paid to you."

"*Don't* pay me any attention," Jenny said bitterly in English. Every single time anyone had paid attention to her on this ship, she'd gotten hurt. "Just leave me alone, all of you."

Tavra's face seemed to harden. "Here." She drew her dagger and offered it to Jenny in one fluid move. "Hold this."

"What?"

"Take the knife." Tavra's voice was as hard as her expression.

Jenny reluctantly grasped it. Until fairly recently, she'd had the common fannish penchant for decorative knives and swords. She even knew, in theory, how to hold a knife. She just didn't want to anymore. But if it would make Tavra shut up and go away--

The next instant Tavra wrenched the carefully-angled knife from her. The point of the blade rested on Jenny's throat, and her wrist was trapped in a twisted hold.

Jenny stared down into Tavra's eyes, too startled to move. She pushed down rising fear. Tavra wouldn't hurt her--much--would she?

Tavra released Jenny's wrist and stepped back, sliding her dagger into her boot as she did so.

Jenny remained absolutely still, holding her wrist. *Crazy. All of them. Completely--*

"Well?" said Tavra.

"Well, w-what?" Jenny's gaze was fastened on Tavra. If that woman jumped at her again--

"You don't know how to use a knife at all, do you?" Tavra said slowly.

Jenny shook her head, with equal slowness.

"How do you defend yourself? And do not attempt to tell me you are an expert at unarmed combat."

"I shouldn't *have* to defend myself!" said Jenny, losing what little control she had left. "Real people don't go around acting like this! This isn't the way it's supposed to be at--"

Tavra cut her off. "I think that we will go speak with Commander Slair."

"*You* go get hit if you want to. I'm staying right here."

"If you think I am so foolish as to leave *you* wandering the ship, you are mistaken. You will accompany me to the commander's quarters." Tavra reached for Jenny's arm.

Jenny shrank back as Tavra put out her hand. There was a long moment of silence.

Jenny finally lowered her eyes and turned to the exit. Tavra remained firmly by her side as they traveled the corridor maze to Commander Slair's rooms. Neither spoke during the trip.

Tavra stopped at the cabin door and spoke in Vulcan to the guards. One of them looked at Jenny and raised an eyebrow. Tavra motioned to Jenny and followed her into the main room.



11/7/80

Тауца

Commander Slair was sitting at his desk, inserting a tape into the computer-viewer. He looked up as they entered. "Yes, Tavra?"

Tavra walked slowly over to the desk. Jenny stayed at the door.

"Commander, I must speak with you," Tavra said.

"Later. I have--"

"Now, Slair."

He studied Tavra for a moment. "If it's that important."

"Anything that affects my safety is important." Tavra nodded in Jenny's direction. "Commander, have you paid any attention to that woman at all? Just how much do you know about her?"

Commander Slair raised one eyebrow, and cast an indifferent glance at Jenny. "I fail to--"

"Well?" Tavra's voice was adamant.

He turned his eyes to Tavra, and rose to his feet. "Well," he said, his voice surprisingly mild, "at least she knows how to keep her mouth shut."

"She does indeed," Tavra said. "And?"

"And she's from one of the out-worlds."

"Is she?" Tavra said coldly. "I doubt it. Even an out-worlder would have more comprehension of her position than she does." She turned to Jenny. "Come here. Explain to the commander why you felt it unnecessary to ask his permission before you imitated a working officer's hairstyle."

Jenny didn't move. The solid door was her sole support at the moment. "You mean cutting it?" she asked uncertainly.

Commander Slair had moved to stand beside Tavra. He was watching Jenny with narrowed eyes. "Well?" he said.

"Why should you care? It's my hair." Jenny's voice was unsteady.

"But you're my lady. How dare you make such an outrageous change in your appearance without permission?"

"And you may be interested to know that she believes you struck her on a capricious impulse." Tavra walked over to Jenny. "Here," Tavra said, pulling her knife from her boot. "I want the commander to see you hold this."

Jenny put her hands behind her back. "Not this time, friend," she said in English.

Tavra replaced the dagger in her boot. "It is exceedingly fortunate that her incompetence was discovered before it killed someone."

*Probably me.* Although Jenny didn't think that was what was worrying Tavra.

Commander Slair, his face absolutely unreadable, also came to stand facing Jenny. "I suppose you did not think this worth mentioning?"

"Mentioning what? You didn't say you were looking for Emma Peel!" She hastily added, as the Vulcan shot her a sharp glance, "Never mind, it was just a joke."

"A joke." His tone instantly killed any impulses Jenny might have had toward levity.

"May I respectfully suggest, Commander, that a little interrogation, however belated, might be in order?" Tavra's tone dripped acid.

Commander Slair eyed Tavra sharply for an instant, and then turned his full attention to Jenny. She pressed back against the door, trying to decide whether dodging another blow would do her any real good. She didn't like the look in those icy-yellow eyes.

He stepped forward to stand directly in front of her. "Enlighten us as to your unique concept of your position."

"Prone," Jenny muttered softly in English.

"Speak Standard."

"You wanted someone to sleep with you," Jenny said. "Well, I do. What more do you want?"

Commander Slair stared at her with what looked like total disbelief.

"As you can see," Tavra said, "she is completely unfamiliar with--"

"Quiet," he said. Then, to Jenny, "You are not from an Imperial world."

"No," Jenny said. "You said you didn't want to hear about my planet."

"She would have been stupid enough to tell you," Tavra said, very quietly. "But you were so angry with the captain for forcing your hand that you would not let her. Five minutes' conversation would have prevented the most egregious blunder of your career."

There was a long, dead, nasty silence.

"You *idiot*," Tavra said.

His lips compressed to a thin line. He spun around to snap back at Tavra in Vulcan. Tavra glared at him. The two proceeded to carry on what was plainly, in any language, an exceedingly acrimonious argument.

As they continued their conversation, paying no attention to Jenny, she risked edging away to a chair. There she sat and waited, her hands clasped tightly together in her lap.

At one point, the Vulcans' argument paused. Both turned to look across at Jenny. Their survey chilled her. Then they continued their discussion, ignoring her once more.

*God, I'd better learn that language. Somehow. FAST.* Jenny tried not to shudder.

Commander Slair and Tavra finally broke off the increasingly heated discussion. Tavra turned away from him, going to sit at his desk. She folded her hands on the desktop and looked steadily at him.

"I see no point in continuing a discussion of what you *should* have done," Tavra said. "The problem remains. How do you intend to correct this dangerous situation?" She transferred her gaze to Jenny, staring at her intently.

Jenny was unhappily conscious of Commander Slair pacing back and forth behind her chair. *Why's Tavra getting away with talking to him like that?*

He paused beside Jenny. "Dispose of her. She is obviously unsuitable."

Jenny began to rise. "But--"

His hand fell heavily on her shoulder, shoving her back to her seat. "Shut up."

Tavra shook her head. "So obviously unsuitable that you only *now* discover it? Try again, Commander."

He shrugged. "I've tired of her."

"After so short a time?"

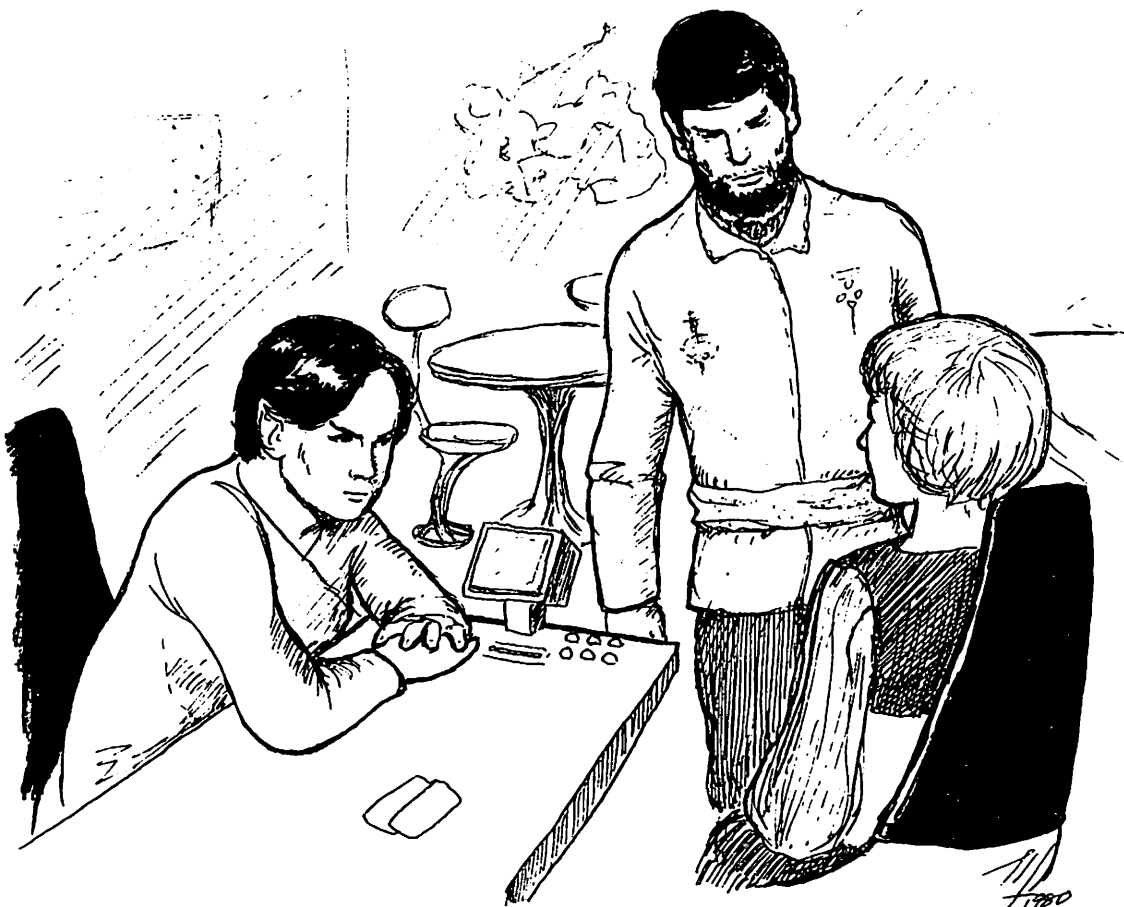
"Then *you* think of something. She's too much of a liability to keep."

Tavra's dark eyes were icy. "And too awkward to dispose of at this point."

Commander Slair looked down at Jenny, annoyance plain on his bearded face. Jenny shifted back, wishing he'd move away.

"You *are* a fool," Tavra added. "Do you want to look like one as well?"

Commander Slair's hand clenched into a fist. Looking up at his coldly furious face, Jenny felt more sheer physical fear than she'd ever



known before. She would have sold her soul, or anything else she happened to possess, to be somewhere, anywhere, else.

"Don't presume too far, cousin," he said.

He and Tavra stared at each other. Then Tavra continued, her eyes still on his face, "Do you want to listen to len Ronan's comments if you try that 'tired of her' story?"

"Conceded," he said, after a long minute of tense silence. He turned away from Jenny, his hands more relaxed. "Very well. If she must remain, she must be taught a modicum of civilized upper-class behavior. Since I am not eager for this matter to be a gossip-point among my staff--"

"Or anyone else's," Tavra said.

"--you, Tavra, are the logical choice as instructor."

Tavra's eyebrows rose. "Yes. You are correct."

At any other time, Jenny would by now have been choking back laughter. It nearly killed Tavra to have to admit that. It was evident even if the Vulcan woman did have a this-is-not-an-expression look plastered on her face.

Commander Slair looked down at Jenny again. "You will not leave these rooms. You will do nothing without permission. Do you completely understand *that*?"

Jenny nodded.

"Very well. I think we had better begin immediately." He paused and regarded Jenny speculatively.

"No," Tavra said. "You cannot keep her incarcerated in your quarters for the next five or six months. She must be on display at official functions, and you know it. And after we put in stationside next week, you'll no longer be able to claim that she is not supplied with suitable clothing."

Tavra's gaze went from Commander Slair to Jenny. "You are fortunate beyond any justification, Slair. When I consider that next week you would have handed this--this--"

Words seemed to fail Tavra at this point. She shook her head. "You would have handed *her* credit vouchers and simply turned her loose to purchase clothing and jewelry--" Tavra's face was stony. "She wouldn't even have taken her knife."

Jenny sent a quick, appalled glance up at Commander Slair, to find him staring down at her with narrowed eyes.

Tavra continued, "And I don't know which one of you looks the more horrified by that prospect."

Commander Slair went back over to his desk. He looked hard at Tavra.

Tavra rose unhurriedly from his chair and moved around the desk to stand beside Jenny. Commander Slair sat in the chair Tavra had just vacated. They both fixed their eyes consideringly on Jenny.

"The first thing we must discover is just what she does know." Tavra regarded Jenny with a certain amount of curiosity. "She certainly seems to have appeared reasonably, if superficially, conversant with Imperial society. However, since you forbade her to talk, her task would have been relatively simple."

*Relatively simple.* Jenny recalled the events of the past week and shivered. She wondered what their reaction would be if she stood up and said, 'I pulled it off because I saw you on a television show once. You were the villains.' This did not seem a good moment to mention STAR TREK. The less she said, the better.

Commander Slair said, in a chilly tone, "I doubt that requesting her



to list the things she does not know will have any useful result."

"True," Tavra said. "We will simply have to cover vital areas, based on the premise that she knows nothing. I also think we had better find out just what she has been doing to occupy her time."

Jenny recognized her cue. "Nothing much. Really. I go swimming. . ."

"Tavra, you'll have to accompany her tomorrow," Commander Slair said.

"I won't go," Jenny said quickly, anxious to appear cooperative.

"You will," he said. "I want no sudden alterations in your routine."

"Nobody knows. I only go when the pool's empty," Jenny said.

The two Vulcans stared at her again. Then Tavra, with an expression of grim satisfaction, looked unwaveringly at Commander Slair.

He studied Jenny, his eyes pale and cold. After a moment, he ran an impatient hand through his hair. "All right, Tavra. Further demonstrations are not necessary."

"Very well. Now--" Tavra turned to Jenny and began talking.

"Wait. Please," Jenny said as Tavra launched into a full-blown lecture. "I can't remember all that at once. Let me write it down."

"I suggest you cultivate a retentive memory." But Tavra also, to Jenny's relief, inserted a recording cassette into the desk console. "You can review this later? So you can write? And read?"

"Of course I can read and write!" Jenny said, stung. "What kind of a--" She cut off that remark. She'd just as soon not hear the answer. "Those slaver-people just didn't teach me to read or write this Imperial Standard nonse--language."

"What languages do you know?" Commander Slair asked.

"English," said Jenny flatly. "And French, sort of."

The two Vulcans lost interest with this answer. Picking up where she'd been interrupted, Tavra continued, "As an officer's lady, you will not. . . ."

As Jenny listened, desperately clutching to the bits of information for future reference, one thing became clear. She had completely misunderstood Commander Slair's original offer.

*'Officer's lady' doesn't translate into 'sex-partner'. Jenny had a slow sinking feeling in her stomach as this fact crystallized. Ornament. Decoration. Conspicuous consumption item. So he can show off. Good God, no WONDER they're so upset.*

Any idiot could manage to go to bed with a man, even with a total stranger. *You're sure living proof of THAT, aren't you?* However, the sex was only a sideline. The real job was to be on display, in public, and that was going to be hell to pull off.

And she'd been luckier than she deserved, even taking that slap into the account. The mere thought of wandering around an Imperial space station by herself made her feel acutely ill. She shivered slightly and gave her full attention to Tavra.

But the Vulcans had a great deal more stamina than she did. Furthermore, neither of them had a headache. An indefinite time later, at what she fuzzily decided must be ninety-three o'clock in the morning, Jenny pulled her wandering thoughts from preoccupation with sleep to hear Tavra say,

"--and remember, you simply inform them you are Commander Slair's lady. Immediately, with no other conversa--"

"You said that. I mean, I thought I wasn't going anywhere by myself." Did they *have* to teach her *all* of their stupid Imperial customs in one evening?

"In the unlikely event that, due to unforeseen circumstances, you find yourself--"

"This is hopeless." Commander Slair placed his hands flat on the desk and pushed himself to his feet. "I'll get someone else."

Jenny rested her heavy head on her hand. That sounded pretty final. To hell with it. Now she could go to sleep.

Tavra walked up to the desk and also laid her hands on it. "Commander, by your incredible negligence, you have placed yourself--and me--in jeopardy. There is no way to dispose of this woman now without revealing that because you were sufficiently irritated you became careless."

Tavra moved back, eyeing Commander Slair steadily, and then went to the door. "You may choose to appear an easy target. I do not. I will not allow myself to be endangered by your criminal stupidity. Permit me to remind you that your control on *this* ship is limited." She paused. "In short, Commander, if she goes, I go. I will have no difficulty obtaining another post. And do not think you can prevent me."

Commander Slair took one long stride toward Tavra.

"Don't try it, cousin Slair," Tavra said. "Not for *your* folly."

Jenny jolted half-awake at the sudden motion and sharp speech. Commander Slair had halted at Tavra's warning statement. The muscles of his face tautened and his hands slowly curled into fists. He turned his head to look at Jenny.

Jenny turned ice-cold as the blood drained from her face. He had

made a very bad mistake. Now she was going to pay for it.

He took a step toward her. Jenny shoved herself out of her chair and hurriedly moved away, putting the chair between herself and the Vulcan. "No," she said in a panic-stricken whisper.

"It is, of course, your prerogative, Slair." Tavra sounded bored and long-suffering. "I would even recommend it, were there the slightest possibility it would do any good." She glanced at Jenny, who was clutching the back of the chair. "I see little point in attempting to continue now. Good night."

Jenny watched the door slide shut behind Tavra, trying vainly to control the rising panic. She had only the vaguest idea of what being really beaten entailed, and she had no desire whatsoever to find out.

Commander Slair hadn't even glanced at the closing door. He took another stalking pace toward Jenny.

She stepped back quickly and tripped on her long skirt. She half-fell to a sprawling seat on the floor. This nightmarish scene couldn't be real, it--

Commander Slair stared down at her. "Get up." His voice was steel-hard, glacial.

For an insane second, Jenny thought of refusing. Then she pushed herself to her feet. She gripped the sides of her skirt to control her shaking hands.

He placed his hands on the gleaming sash around his waist. His fingers gradually closed on the golden fabric. "We will continue this--discussion--tomorrow," he said at last. He turned and went into the bedroom, pausing at the door to turn out the main room's lights.

Jenny backed to the couch and fell onto it, limp. She closed her eyes, sending up an incoherent but deeply thankful prayer to whoever or whatever had been listening just now.

Quietly, she curled up against the cushions at the end of the couch. At least she wouldn't be stuck with the floor.

As she cast an apprehensive glance in the direction of the bedroom, Commander Slair reappeared in the doorway, sharply outlined against the light. He was unfastening his tunic.

"Get in here," he said.

Jenny went rigid with sick surprise. Share a bed with him after all that? *He's got to be kidding!*

Shrugging out of his tunic, he stepped back into the bedroom.

*Don't you remember? Vulcans never tell jokes.* She squeezed her eyes

shut for an instant. Beating wasn't the only way a man could take out anger on a woman.

*Come on, stupid. Move. Do you want him to come and get you?* The thought was enough to propel her off the couch and into the bedroom.

Once undressed and lying stiffly at the far edge of the bed, Jenny tilted her head a fraction of an inch, keeping track of the Vulcan's location. As he approached the bed, she clenched her hands at her sides. She quickly turned her head away as he stretched out beside her and turned out the lights.

After several endless minutes passed with no word or movement from Commander Slair, Jenny began breathing freely again. She tried to force herself to relax.

*'Oh, I can manage this. Why, I know all about STAR TREK. This'll be easy.'* Oh, God, Jenny, are you ever a jackass.

Commander Slair wasn't the only one who'd badly miscalculated.

# Part Two

Officer's Lady

The following several days left Jenny thinking with longing of that boring week when everyone had almost totally ignored her. Her initial relief at now being free to question and get help didn't survive the first of Tavra's ruthless lecture sessions.

The Vulcans were not interested in answering what they considered unimportant questions, or in providing any information that *they* did not think vital. Tavra's view, freely expressed, was simple: Jenny had only to shut up, listen, remember--and do as she was told.

"Don't cause any more difficulties," Commander Slair added. "Or you may find the next few months exceedingly unpleasant."

*More unpleasant than it's been already?* Jenny thought, looking from Tavra to Commander Slair and rubbing her neck gently.

Commander Slair was watching her intently. He lifted one eyebrow, and the corner of his mouth curved up. It was not an amiable expression. "Yes," he said. "Infinitely."

After staring at him for a moment, Jenny turned her attention back to Tavra. Her concentration was broken by periodic, nervous glances at Commander Slair.

By the end of that first interminable evening, Jenny had the dizzying sensation of cramming for finals after cutting every class for the entire semester. She was sure of only one thing--this was never going to work.

As she'd discovered last night, she'd gotten the whole setup wrong, which just figured. Apparently an 'officer's lady' was as much a badge of rank and importance as the golden sash and the gleaming insignia of ranking: an expensive, ornamental piece of ostentation on a par with the fragile, costly gowns of an upper-class Victorian woman. An *expected* display.

*Just another way of saying 'See what a hotshot I am',* Jenny decided, listening to Tavra with gloomy fascination. *It shows he can afford to keep a totally useless person cluttering up the place doing nothing except her nails.* But what a waste of money and space--and she'd already gotten some pretty strong clues that Commander Slair didn't want to waste either one. It must be a great way for the Imperial Starfleet to keep

officers from hoarding loot. It kept them spending it in a semi-obligatory game of conspicuous consumption.

It made sense, after a fashion. It was a pretty damn luxurious way for the 'ladies' to make a living, Jenny supposed. *A nice, normal, respectable occupation. Wait a minute, isn't that a bit inconsistent? They've got female officers. Oh well, it's their stupid culture, not mine.*

*And if I'd been the Imperial-backwater farm girl the commander thought I was, I'd have been overjoyed at a 'chance' like this. Oh, brother, what a mess.* Jenny shot another sidelong glance at Commander Slair. The whole mess was the commander's own fault, too--a consideration that had never been known to improve anyone's temper. If there was anything in the whole universe more irritating than the certain knowledge that a problem was all due to one's own stupidity, Jenny didn't know what it was.

"Oh, shit," Jenny muttered.

"Speak Standard," said Commander Slair icily.

It was a long and tiring week. Jenny had never absorbed so much information in so short a time before in her life. As she sat at the desk, staring at current newstapes, she decided she'd be just as happy if she never had to try it again.

"Oh, the hell with it." She turned off the viewer and rested her head on her folded arms. By now, she was exhausted, angry, frightened, and fed up to the teeth with both Tavra and Commander Slair. It had been particularly unnerving to discover that he still expected sex when he felt like it, with a complete disregard for everything else that had happened during the past week. No doubt it was the result of proximity and 'the illogic of waste', but she could have done without it. She felt that she had enough problems.

Jenny quickly straightened as the door slid open and Tavra entered. *Oh, fantastic. Another lecture session.*

"Come on," Tavra said. "We've docked."

Suddenly feeling revived, Jenny tried not to jump to her feet too eagerly. "You mean we're here? There? At the space station?" Sealed in the ship, it was impossible to tell where they were, or even that they were moving at all--a disconcerting sensation at best. The thought of getting off the *Victory*, however briefly, was intoxicating.

"Yes. Come--"

"How marvelous! How big is it? What kind of stores are there?" Jenny tried to keep her sudden buoyancy under strict control, without much success. She could hear the cheerful bounce in her voice, and she was talking too much.

Tavra's face took on a stony expression that Jenny had discovered usually masked deep unease. "Shut up," Tavra said. "You will remember that your behavior reflects upon the commander, and conduct yourself properly." The words 'if possible' were almost audible.

So were the words 'or else'. Jenny wasn't interested in discovering what *that* little phrase covered.

Jenny's resolution to remain maturely cool, calm, and collected dissolved with her first sight of the station. Anything would have been an overwhelming and welcome change from Commander Slair's two rooms, even a small, drab, and deserted MacDonald's.

The space station was neither small, drab, nor deserted. Once they emerged from the docking and passage areas into the main shopping complex, Jenny stopped dead.

"My God, it's a shopping mall!"

"Don't stop like that," said Tavra.

"Sorry," Jenny said absently, still staring.

The group, consisting of Jenny, Tavra, and two of what Jenny thought of as 'the commander's other operatives', moved toward the main thoroughfare. As they walked along, Jenny tried to stare in all directions at once, and promptly managed to walk into Tavra.

Tavra favored Jenny with an icy glare.

"Sorry," Jenny said again. She actually traveled at least thirty feet before a movement in one of the store windows caught her eye. She came to an entranced halt, gazing in awe at a collection of fluffy puppy-like animals. One of them bounced at the window, and stood gazing at her with round golden eyes. Its soft fur was a distinct pink.

Jenny took a step toward the window. "Oh, they're adorable. What are they?"

"Will you kindly remain with us?" Tavra said.

Jenny reluctantly turned from the window. If she could only tell Tavra and those guards to get lost and leave her alone--they weren't going to let her see *anything*! Jenny eyed her escorts speculatively. Now that they were off the ship, maybe she should try to do something appropriate, such as escape.

*Right. And go where?* Leaving aside the fact that she couldn't get off the station, any more than she could the ship, she still didn't know enough to last fifteen minutes--no, make that five. Even if she did, through some miracle, succeed in eluding Tavra's chaperonage, then what?

As Jenny hesitated, Tavra stepped close to her, motioning the guards back a pace.



"I grow tired of this," Tavra said softly. "I will not strike you--now. Not in public--lady. But that is a restraint I can abandon later. Now *come on.*"

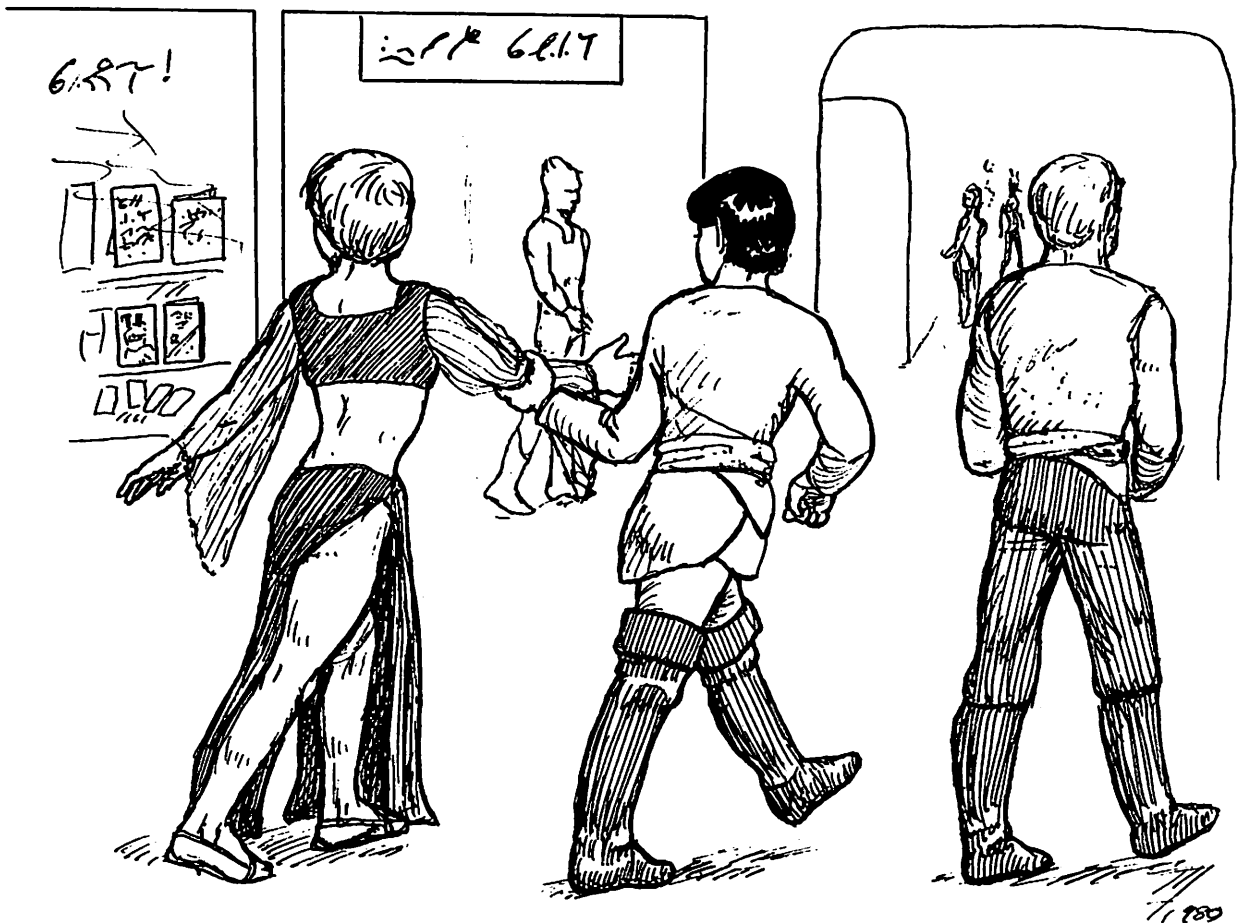
They proceeded quietly and without interruption for some time. Subdued, Jenny tried to sightsee without banging into the Vulcan woman again. Then, as she scanned the colorful display windows across the walkway, she saw something that drove all other considerations from her mind.

"Hot damn!" she said in English. "A *bookstore!*"

Before she could complete her first reflexive step toward the store, Tavra's hand clamped on her arm in an iron grip.

"Don't do that!" Tavra snapped.

With a sigh, Jenny turned back, still eyeing the bookstore with longing. "Oh well, I suppose I couldn't read any of them anyway. I really doubt they stock anything in English." Then she looked at Tavra and quickly added, "Sorry."



Tavra eyed her for a moment and then nodded very slightly.

They managed to proceed without further incident. Feeling thoroughly flattened, Jenny kept her mouth shut. This excursion could have been so much fun, too, under other circumstances. *If only my friends were with me instead of that damn Vulcan! Oh, Isabel, I wish you were here--*

She cut off the thought. That was a hell of a thing to wish on your best friend.

The moment she walked through the intricately-tiled entrance to the store, Jenny felt inferior and unkempt. This wasn't a clothes store, it was a designer's salon.

*Good God*, Jenny thought numbly, gazing around the elegant foyer, every inch of which screamed 'expensive' When the Vulcans had said 'clothes', she'd been thinking of Macy's, not Halston's.

A tall and regal woman in a skin-sleek green jumpsuit, who turned out to be one of the saleswomen, led them to a private room. The two guards stationed themselves outside the door as Jenny and Tavra followed the woman into the room.

As Jenny looked around, Tavra and the saleswoman launched into a discussion of Jenny's clothing requirements. Once the extent of the wardrobe needed was made clear, the saleswoman became quite enthusiastic about the project.

"You can go almost anywhere in jeans and a t-shirt," Jenny remarked, even though she knew half the sentence wouldn't translate.

Tavra looked at her and employed the one phrase of Vulcan Jenny had been taught. "Shut up."

Seeing that she was not considered to be making any useful contribution to the conversation, Jenny wandered over to one of the delicately-made chairs grouped along the wall. She sat down and idly traced the lines of gilding on the arm.

After several more minutes of discussion, the saleswoman tapped a switch on the wall. A portion of the wall seemed to dissolve, revealing a large viewscreen. It turned out to be a fashion listing. Images of clothing, as well as models displaying various outfits, were shown on the screen.

"Oh, how neat," said Jenny, getting up and going over to Tavra. "It's just like *A Tale of Two Clocks*. That's a nice outfit."

It was not only nice, but, since it was a perfectly simple tunic and slit-sided pants set in a superb shade of sable brown, Jenny was sure it was probably hideously expensive.

"No."

Jenny shrugged. "That's pretty too. Red's always nice."

Tavra condescended to inform her that, "The commander likes blue."

"Great. Doesn't he like any other color?"

"I know that he likes blue," Tavra said.

"Maybe I should just paint myself with woad," Jenny muttered. "The man should have picked on an Andorian."

"What?"

"They're *all* blue." Jenny noted Tavra's tightened mouth, and shut her own. Not only had that remark come perilously close to STAR TREK, but the Vulcan plainly didn't enjoy the role of straight man.

There was silence for a moment. Tavra turned back to the viewscreen.

Jenny's control faded again as the screen displayed a series of ever-more exotically peculiar outfits. Obviously she was the only one in the room who thought they were a riot, which was a shame. Then a strange concoction appeared. It was composed, as nearly as she could determine, of lavender feathers, silver lamé, and spangles. There wasn't much of it, either.

"Dear God." Jenny clapped her hands, an ecstatic expression on her face. "I have rarely seen anything so appalling. I must have one."

"It is unsuitable," Tavra said tightly.

"I thought it was," Jenny said cheerfully. "And look at that one--"

"Unsuitable." Tavra hardly glanced at the screen.

"I saw a woman wearing something just like it on our way here. Don't you *like* sequins?"

"No." Tavra's voice was hard.

Jenny shot a sidelong glance at the Vulcan. It was all too easy to forget, in her excitement, that she wasn't with a friend who'd be amused by Jenny's notorious affection for anything in horrendously bad taste.

Jenny continued to gaze at the clothing presented by the screen. It apparently went in cycles: it was once more showing items that looked like something a normal person would consider wearing in public. The clothing looked odd, but nice.

"Those are pretty," Jenny said.

Tavra, talking to the saleswoman, didn't look around. "No."

Jenny looked at Tavra. Then she said, in English, "Oh, shit. And I did it my very own self, too, damn it." After her remarks on the glories of that feathered thing, Tavra probably wouldn't trust her to pick out a pair of white socks.

The saleswoman finally nodded and left the room. Jenny stared morosely at the dress on the screen. "That's pretty too," she said, not very hopefully.

Tavra glanced at the dress. "The commander would not like it."

Jenny couldn't see a damn thing wrong with the dress, except that it wasn't blue. "You mean *you* don't think he'd like it."

"That's right."

Jenny's fingers curled, nails digging into her palms. She was getting pretty damn tired of Tavra. "I don't care what he likes."

"You'd better," Tavra said calmly.

Jenny took a deep breath, relaxed her hands, and gave up. She was willing to bet that Commander Slair wouldn't notice what she wore unless it had pink and purple polka dots, and maybe not even then. But it was apparent that Tavra wasn't taking any chances. After the way she'd forced Commander Slair to keep Jenny, Tavra plainly wasn't going to give him any excuse whatsoever to complain. Any erring would be on the side of extreme conservatism.

Later that evening, Jenny was curled up on the couch, flipping through a magazine Tavra had acquired for her. *Probably to give me some idea of current fashion*, Jenny thought, fascinated by the magazine's similarity to those on Earth.

At that, she glanced at her own outfit, a dark blue tunic and open-sided slacks affair. All the hems and edges were heavily embroidered in green and silver. *Quiet good taste? Oh well . . . Now that Tenaya's got her clothes back, I bet she burns them.*

Jenny stared down at the magazine again, then tossed it to the couch. Commander Slair, at his desk as usual, looked up quickly, then once more became immersed in whatever it was those seemingly-endless reports covered.

Jenny wrapped her arms around her knees and looked intently at the silky fabric of her slacks. She devoutly wished Commander Slair would go back to paying no attention to her at all. This constant feeling of being watched was going to drive her crazy. She looked up as the intercom buzzed.

"Yes?" Commander Slair said. "Come in."

Tavra entered and glanced over at Jenny with a trace of satisfaction.

"Here are the clothing bills. I have taken care of the credit transfer." She placed a cassette on the desk. "May I remind you, sir, that if you intend to have her accompany you to the viceroy's inaugural reception on Baltakis, as will be expected," there was the slightest stress on the word, "she will require jewelry and ornaments appropriate to your rank."

*Don't think he'd remember without that, huh?* Jenny thought with a rueful grin.

"You didn't need to ask, Tavra. See to it."

"Yes, Commander." Tavra left without another look in Jenny's direction.

After a moment, Jenny said diffidently, "Am I supposed to go with her for that?"

Commander Slair looked at her, his eyebrows slightly raised. "Why?"

In English, in the sweetest accents she could get out through gritted teeth, Jenny said, "I only hope, Commander, that your next lady will be so far from my size that she'd can't use *any* of these stupid clothes and you'll have to buy all new ones. And I hope she'll look so rotten in blue she'll have to wear--wear *pink*, *all* the time."

As he started to tell her to speak Standard, she rose to her feet. "Thank you so much for this lovely thimble," she continued in English. Switching to Standard, she added in a flat voice, "I've always wanted to be showered in gems. Thanks. You can hardly imagine the depths of my gratitude."

Deciding a curtsy would be too blatantly sarcastic, she sat down again and reached for her magazine.

*Jesus H. Christ, are you out of your mind?* Now that she'd made her little surprise gesture of defiance, it was a bit late to wish she'd kept her mouth sensibly shut. If Commander Slair recognized just how insulting she'd meant to be-- She looked over at him with trepidation.

He lifted one eyebrow. "Gratitude is unnecessary." His tone was as flat as hers had been. Leaning back in his chair, he flipped on the computer's viewscreen.

"You bet it is," Jenny said under her breath in English. Relaxing back against the cushions, she once more began flipping through the brilliant pages of the magazine. All those beautiful and odd dresses--evening gowns? All that jewelry--

*Jewelry.* Jenny's hand froze in the act of turning the page. *'Jewelry for the--' Reception? Viceroy? Now, wait a minute--*

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"I need hardly remind you that on no account are you to leave her alone," Commander Slair said.

Tavra nodded.

"What should I say if--" Jenny began.

"As little as possible," Commander Slair said. "Preferably nothing at all."

"That's not very helpful," Jenny muttered in English.

"And speak Standard."

Jenny looked at the two Vulcans with resentful apprehension. Commander Slair, in glittering full-dress uniform that made his regular yellow and gold seem drab, was colder and even more formidable than usual. And Tavra, also in more elaborate dark blue uniform, looked positively grim. They would both no doubt infinitely prefer to leave her bound and gagged in a closet rather than take her to this reception for the new sector viceroy. They might be right at that. God knew they'd given her enough instruction on proper behavior for this occasion during the last ten days, but. . . .

"Curtsy while you're thinking what to say," she began reciting absently, twisting one of the heavy rings nervously around her finger. "Speak in French if you can't think what to say in Eng--" She stopped short as Commander Slair turned quickly back to her. "Sorry."

He regarded her with icy yellow eyes. "No," he said to Tavra. "I shall say she is indisposed."

"That is, of course, your decision, Commander," Tavra said. "And it will work--once."

Mouth tight, Commander Slair took a step toward Jenny. "You will not make any jokes," he said in coldly ominous tones, "even in that barbarous language of yours."

"Yes, Commander," Jenny said. "I mean, no, I won't." By now, the two Vulcans had her as jumpy as they obviously were, and her stomach was tying itself in knots. All this fuss over what was, after all, nothing but a party--

Commander Slair turned back to Tavra. "We will remain for the shortest possible period of time."

"That should reduce the chance of major errors," Tavra said.

Jenny didn't think Tavra sounded too hopeful about this. Tavra then switched to Vulcan, and Jenny took the opportunity to go to the mirror, letting the unintelligible discussion flow over her head.

*Boy, does that look strange.* Jenny stared at her mirrored image. It didn't look like her at all.

Her dress, cut straight and low across the shoulders, and with deeply curved side cutouts, reminded her of a medieval sideless surcoat. However, there was no undergown. Since the voluminous skirt was slit almost to the hip on each side as well, she was showing an inordinate amount of skin.

She was also adorned with earrings, a jeweled band around her throat, a matching belt slung around her hips, rings, and a peculiar ornament that coiled around her thigh. All of it was ornate and heavy.

*It's that leg thing that really gets me. It's going to drive me crazy, I know it will. And those damn sandals--* The golden straps wound up her legs to her knees, and she was sure they were already sliding down.

The rest of the outfit was just as bad. She felt very insecurely fastened together. She gave the neck of her shimmering blue dress an upward tug with one hand and gingerly touched her hair with the other. It was now in soft curls, with a thin chain of small, glowing blue stones twined through it.

Aside from the fact that Jenny felt totally unequal to this getup, she was miserably sure that neither dress, hair chain, leg ornament, nor sandal straps were going to stay up.

"Stop fidgeting," Commander Slair said sharply, breaking off his conversation with Tavra.

Jenny continued staring at her reflection. "It feels as if it's all going to fall off any minute." She gave the dress another slight tug.

"I assure you, it will not." Tavra sounded almost resigned. "And leave your hair alone, too."

By the time they actually arrived at the main reception room that evening, Jenny felt rather like an extra in a costume epic. She quickly noted, with considerable relief, that so far this affair seemed almost prosaically similar to a super-formal affair back home. What she'd seen so far was a sort of White House—Society for Creative Anachronism cross.

With this realization, Jenny brightened a bit. She might even wind up enjoying this evening, assuming all her clothing actually stayed put.

*After all, how often do I get to wear superb makeup, real jewelry, and a ball gown--half of one, anyway--in a real palace on an alien planet? Not that she'd been allowed to see any of--Baltakis, was it?--after they'd shuttled down. A hotel room was a hotel room. Come to that, that shuttle's just like being in an airplane. Well, anyway, if a dedicated historical novel reader and occasional SCAer can't bluff their way through a mere court function--*





She followed Commander Slair past the colorfully dressed people crowding the room. As they approached the far end of the hall, Jenny could see a few people standing in a relatively clear area. Commander Slair was headed in their direction.

"Now what?" said Jenny softly to Tavra, who was stationed firmly at her side.

Tavra moved even closer to Jenny. "The commander must pay his respects to the viceroy. Smile and curtsy properly." The Vulcan's tone indicated that she expected Jenny to fall flat on her face.

The Imperial Viceroy was a richly dressed man of vigorous middle age. Even to Jenny's eyes, he projected an air of commanding authority.

*Of course he does, you idiot. He probably has to knock off two or three assassins every morning. 'Six assassinable thugs before breakfast'--*

They reached the viceroy just as she concocted the atrocious joke. Commander Slair bowed. Jenny, a split-second's hesitation later, swept the viceroy her best SCA court curtsy, with what she hoped was a dazzling, rather than a snickering, smile.

She had a flashing impulse to inform her companions that not only had all sensible people long ago agreed that an interstellar empire was impossible, but that, furthermore, the whole concept of an Imperial Galactic Empire was incredibly trite and old-fashioned. In spite of a concerted effort to keep her face straight, her smile widened.

"My congratulations on your recent promotion, Commander." The viceroy turned to smile at Jenny with what she took to be approval.

There was a slight but perceptible pause before Commander Slair said, "Thank you, my lord." He then gave Jenny a look that she correctly interpreted to mean, 'Move along before you do something stupid'.

Jenny dipped another curtsy to the viceroy and backed off. Once out of the viceroy's orbit, she began to stare around the room again.

This evening was beginning to put a strain on her control. She wanted to bounce about, making comments on the alien decor, telling bad jokes, and sharing her excitement with someone.

Unfortunately, not only didn't Vulcans tell jokes, they wouldn't let her tell jokes either. She could, of course, spend the entire evening making rude comments in English. However, the mere thought of Commander Slair's later reaction to this was enough to make her grit her teeth.

After a moment, she turned to Tavra, who apparently didn't get presented to people. "Tavra? Is there somewhere I can stand out of the way and watch? Is that all right?" Sometime in the last two minutes, Commander Slair seemed to have vanished into the depths of social obligation, leaving Jenny to Tavra's competent guardianship.

"That seems an excellent suggestion."

"And so surprising, coming from me," Jenny said tartly before she could stop herself. Looking nervously at Tavra, she added, "I wish you'd stop acting as if you expected me to explode, or bite someone. Anyone with half a brain can get through a party like this. You certainly gave me enough advice."

Tavra looked at her sharply. "It isn't over yet. Come on." She led Jenny toward the relative calm around the edges of the room.

Jenny followed, staring entranced at the occupants of the lavish hall. These came in a bewildering variety of sizes and color combinations. There were men in dress uniforms, men in equally splendid civilian clothing, and women in dazzling evening dress. There were even one or two women in dress uniform.

"Hey, Tavra?"

"Yes?"

"Aren't any of the other people from the ship here? I should think the--"

"Yes, of course."

*Yes, of course, and we're going to stay as far away from them as possible. Right.* This didn't precisely blight Jenny's evening. For her part, the farther away those people stayed, the better.

As they made their way across the room, Jenny heard music, the rhythm oddly patterned. She slowed to look through a large arching doorway. So there was a ballroom, too. The figures of the dance were as intricately precise as the music.

"This whole thing's just like--" Jenny began, only to be interrupted by Tavra saying,

"Don't stop like that."

They finally reached an alcove at the side of the room, and Jenny was free to stand and stare as much as she liked at the oddly peaceful scene. It was funny--the reception hall seemed remarkably free from the atmosphere of battle, murder, and sudden death that pervaded the *Victory*. This in spite of the daggers and knives worn by almost everyone Jenny could see.

*Aha, so THAT's why almost all the women's clothes are open along the sides. 'Current fashion dictates ladies' knives will be worn on the leg this fall'. That's funny, that woman isn't wearing a knife either--* Jenny's attention was caught by a man in a uniform of black lavishly shot with gold. *Wow. They sure don't believe in subtlety, do they?*

"If the light hit that uniform right, it'd blind people for miles,"

she said impulsively to Tavra. Receiving no answer, Jenny went back to her study of the room. There was another odd omission. Jenny looked at Tavra doubtfully, and decided to try anyway.

"Tavra? Why aren't there any guards? Or guns? I should think the viceroy would be afraid of--"

"Just because you do not see them, do not ever assume they are not there," Tavra said. "The entire reception room complex is under constant surveillance by the Viceregal Guard. Only a suicidal fool would attempt anything in the main rooms."

"Oh." Jenny gathered from that statement that if you wanted to knife someone, you were supposed to do it out in the hall. She gazed around at the decorative carvings covering most of the walls, wondering which panels hid guards. "I suppose the guards're all set to shoot anybody who tried anything?"

Tavra stared at Jenny. "No."

"No?" said Jenny in surprise.

"If others did not stop the person, they'd shoot everyone in the room," said Tavra. "It is a remarkably effective deterrent to impulsive violence."

"I'll bet," said Jenny in a hollow voice. "I think I need a drink."

"If you like," Tavra said indifferently. "Over this way."

Tavra headed back into the center of the room. As they worked their way back across the floor, Jenny resolutely ignored the twitchy feeling between her shoulder blades. She also decided she hadn't been joking about needing a drink.

She sidestepped to avoid running into a uniformed back and nearly bumped into another gold-laméd officer. He favored Jenny with a swift appraisal that made her teeth crawl.

"Looking for someone?" he inquired, with what Jenny considered a really unpleasant smile.

"No," she said coldly in her best well-brought-up 'go away creep' accents. Since Tavra was close beside her, she had no qualms about this. In English, she added, "Honestly, you'd think in a galactic empire they'd have come up with at least *one* new line. I wonder how you say 'Beat it, stupid' in Standard?"

The officer was regarding Tavra with disfavor. He glanced at the insignia on the Vulcan's dark-blue uniform and frowned. "You're one of Commander Slair's people, aren't you?"

"Affirmative. And *she*," Tavra said, nodding at Jenny, "is the commander's lady."

Without actually moving, the man gave the distinct impression of taking a step backward. He surveyed Jenny with a more polite but more curious look. "About time he started keeping up his rank properly."

"You will excuse us," Tavra stated. She touched Jenny's arm, and they resumed their progress.

By the time they reached the refreshment area, Jenny not only wanted a drink, she felt she deserved one. She wished she knew just how long this affair was going to go on. As she selected, totally at random, from the multicolored array of beverages available, Commander Slair reappeared.

"Any difficulties?"

"No, Commander. People are curious, of course."

"That can't be helped, under the circumstances," he said. "I think we can leave now without--"

Tavra, who was facing the main entrance to the reception room, stiffened. "Commander."

Jenny looked at Tavra, and continued taking cautiously approving sips of the tart, honey-colored drink. Now what?

Commander Slair shot a keen glance at Tavra and turned to scan the entrance. His mouth tightened. "One of their notorious last-minute surprise appearances. They were supposed to be off-planet. We can't leave now. I am quite sure the ambassador's wife would choose to misconstrue the action."

He looked at Jenny; who eyed him questioningly while taking another mouthful of whatever her drink was. "Very well. I have no choice but to introduce her. Then we'll be able to leave." He paused, then addressed Jenny. "See that you display the same behavior that you demonstrated when presented to the viceroy."

Jenny nodded. The commander and Tavra didn't seem too keen on seeing this ambassador, whoever he was. Maybe it was a Klingon. That might be amusing, in a peculiar sort of way. Jenny took a last precautionary swallow of her drink, just as Tavra said to Commander Slair,

"Commander, the Ambassador and Lady Sarek are--"

Jenny inhaled at least half a mouthful of her drink and began choking. "What?" she gasped between coughs.

The Vulcans regarded her apprehensively. *Probably hoping I'll strangle myself--that'd solve all their problems.* She managed to straighten up and stop coughing by an effort of will she wouldn't have thought possible.

"I didn't hear that, did I?" she asked plaintively.

"If you are recovered, we will greet the ambassador," Commander Slair

said repressively. When Jenny didn't move, he removed the glass from her fingers--it was practically empty anyway, since she'd just spilled most of its contents on the rug--and placed it on the table. "Come."

*I must have heard it wrong*, Jenny said to herself hopefully as she accompanied the two Vulcans. *Fun's fun, but Hodgkin's Law of Parallel Development will only stretch so far.*

"Uh, Tavra," Jenny began. "About this ambassador . . ."

"Sarek. You have some question?"

"Never mind. Just forget it." They were now close enough for Jenny to see the ambassador in question. He was a Vulcan, all right--tall and heavysset. And if that petite, silver-haired human woman at his side was his wife--

"Very true, Amanna," the ambassador said to the woman.

"Jesus H. Christ," said Jenny, in a soft, heartfelt tone. Commander Slair glared at her coldly and moved forward to talk to Ambassador Sarek. A moment later Commander Slair motioned her toward him.

"This is my lady, Ambassador," he said, sounding unenthusiastic.

Jenny sank easily into a deep curtsy. In fact, she really doubted her ability to stand at this point, and wasn't at all sure she'd be able to get up again. This whole evening had just turned into a roaring farce.

She reverted instinctively to English. "I don't think I can *stand* much more of this. I know STAR TREK lives, but this is getting ridiculous." She looked up at Ambassador Sarek, who was watching her with what looked like curiosity. This Sarek didn't look like Mark Lenard, but he was very much the same physical type. Middle-aged but magnetic.

"Jean Lorrah, eat your heart out," Jenny added.

Sarek looked to Commander Slair. "I don't believe I've ever heard that language before. May I request a translation?"

"She's from an outlands planet." Commander Slair favored Jenny with a furious glare. His fingers closed on her upper arm in a traplike grip and he pulled her to her feet. "The Ambassador would like a translation of your courteous remarks."

"Huh?" All things considered, this was as much in the way of incisive wit and brilliance as Jenny could muster. "Uh, I, uh, was . . . was just saying what an--an unexpected honor it is to meet you. Sir. And Lady Amanda too, of course."

She knew instantly that she had, somehow, put her foot in it. There was a frigid silence. She cast a pleading glance at Commander Slair for enlightenment.

"Lady Sarek, it is always a privilege to speak with you," the commander said.

Her eyes fixed on Jenny's face, the ambassador's wife suddenly smiled. It gave an air of added sweetness to her still-charming face. Jenny found herself smiling back, rather tentatively.

"You've been away too long, Commander," Lady Sarek said. "And how nice to meet your new companion. Are you going to be on planet for any length of time? When does your ship leave?"

"In three days," Commander Slair said.

"Then you must grant me the pleasure of your lady's company tomorrow afternoon. You know how interested I am in our more--" Lady Sarek hesitated a fraction of a second, looking at Jenny, "--remote territories."

The ambassador's wife turned her pleasant smile back to Jenny. Still stunned, Jenny bobbed another curtsy, for lack of any other inspiration.

"She will be delighted," Commander Slair said. The undertones of gritted teeth were barely masked by his civil response.

Jenny glanced at him quickly. He was staring straight at Amanda--Lady Sarek, his face stonily impassive.

He bowed slightly. "Thank you, Lady Sarek. Ambassador."

"Well, what are you going to do about Lady Sarek's gracious--invitation?" Tavra said, breaking the silence. Neither of the Vulcans had said an unnecessary word from the time they left the ambassador's group until they reached the groundcar and were on their way back to the hotel. Jenny had been too bemused by her run-in with Sarek and Amanda--Amanna--to say anything either.

"I have little choice in the matter. She'll have to go, of course." At the slight shake of Tavra's head, he snapped, "What did you want me to do, knife everyone within twenty feet of us?"

"Every one of whom heard her insult the ambassador's wife," Tavra said, staring bitterly at Jenny. "Do not ever again refer to her as 'Lady Amanna', even if you learn to pronounce it correctly. She is 'Lady Sarek'. She's the ambassador's wife, not his lady or his concubine. And do not call her 'Sarek's lady', either."

"Lady Sarek," Jenny repeated. *'Amanna', huh? I wish I could stop thinking of radar ranges every time they say that.*

"A point which I am certain we covered," Tavra said. "Having succeeded in calling the ambassador's wife his lady--"

"Like me?" Jenny suggested.

"Hardly," Commander Slair said. "Shut up." He turned to Tavra. "It wouldn't have made much difference, Tavra. It gave the Lady Sarek more leverage, but it would have been a difficult invitation to refuse in any case."

The content of these remarks finally penetrated. Jenny sat bolt upright, horrified. Apparently she had somehow gotten roped into a private meeting with the ambassador's wife tomorrow. They wouldn't be so concerned if Tavra would be along to keep Jenny's feet out of her mouth. And no matter how charming Amanda was--

"Wait a minute," she said. "I can't go visit Sarek and Amanda by myself!"

"I was not aware," said Commander Slair coldly, "that you were on such intimate terms with the ambassador and his wife."

Jenny quickly looked down at her hands, hoping she looked properly penitent. She had a vivid recollection of the last time she'd had her friends over for a fannish weekend. Isabel had just had the privilege of reading the manuscript of Jean Lorrah's forthcoming novel, something called *Night of the Twin Moons*, and had told all about it in great and sexy detail. This had led naturally into an in-depth discussion of Sarek and Amanda's marriage and a number of logical-thing-to-do topics. *If it's intimate terms we're talking about, Commander. . . .*

She bit her lip to hide a grin. "Besides, I'm sure Lady--Sarek doesn't really want to see me," Jenny offered hopefully. "She was just being polite."

"Polite?" said Tavra. "It was an order."

"And not a particularly subtle one," added Commander Slair.

"Oh," Jenny said. Well, she was going to have an opportunity any red-blooded trekfan should want to give their eyeteeth for--the chance to find out *why* it was the logical thing to do. She was beginning to wish she'd never *heard* of STAR TREK.

And she could tell she was in for another marathon cram session. It would be nice if this time those two Vulcans would remember that *some* people needed sleep. Especially since all of their hours of instructions could probably be distilled into one catch-all phrase: Shut up.

The following afternoon, Jenny sat in Lady Sarek's small, boudoir-like room sharing with her the local equivalent of high tea. The room was a frothy conglomeration of pale pinks, silvery grays, and soft greens, cluttered with knick-knacks and flowers. It was a perfect compliment to Lady Sarek's delicately fragile charm.

Jenny's first pleased impression was that Lady Sarek *was* charming, even if she did make Jenny feel cloddish. Lady Sarek was *nice*--

At this point, an alarm rang in Jenny's mind. No one else she'd met in the Empire had been 'nice'. So why--? With chagrin, she woke to the realization that she was being politely grilled by Lady Sarek. The ambassador's wife was plainly as practised and efficient as any professional interrogation team--if more pleasant.

Dear, sweet Amanda--no, Lady Sarek--had a mind like a steel trap and was about as delicate as a wolverine. And after another five minutes of that grandmotherly concern, Jenny would have told her *anything*.

For some reason, spilling her entire story to Lady Sarek seemed like a really bad idea. It was a comfort to be able to take refuge, with perfect truth, in a phrase that Jenny, shaken, employed with increasing frequency as the conversation progressed.

"I don't know," Jenny said for the fourth time in five minutes. This was starting to sound a bit rude, somehow, even though true. After a moment's consideration, she added, "The commander does not confide in me, Lady Sarek."

Lady Sarek smiled. It didn't reach any part of her face but her mouth. "I know. Vulcans can be so reticent."

Smiling back was more than Jenny could manage. "I'll just bet," she said conversationally in English. "I know who has the upper fist in your marriage, and it sure as hell isn't the ambassador."

Lady Sarek looked politely inquiring.

"I was just saying it's quite a privilege to be able to meet you, Lady Sarek. I've heard so much about you and your family." Jenny suddenly knew that if she didn't ask, she was going to hate herself for a week. She leaned forward and began impulsively, "About your son, my lady--"

"Which one?"

"Uh--"

"They're both highly successful, of course."

"Of course," Jenny repeated numbly. *Probably afraid to come home if they're not.* With the commendable aim of keeping the ambassador's wife in a good mood, she added, "It's difficult to believe you have two grown children, my lady." This wasn't true, of course, but--

Lady Sarek looked genuinely amused. "Four."

"Four. How nice." So much for Vulcan's famous 'population problem' in fan literature. Jenny wondered how long she was going to be stuck here. She was rapidly running out of unexceptional topics of conversation. She had no intention of delving into Spock's history now. Thank God Sarek didn't seem about to put in an appearance.





"Tell me, my dear--yes, I know the commander doesn't make you his confidant--" Lady Sarek still sounded amused. Jenny eyed her uncertainly, wondering what she was about to be zapped with this time. "But surely you can at least tell me how our dashing raid-leader is settling in now that he's--shall we say tied down?--in administration."

"*Him?*" Jenny stared at Lady Sarek in disbelief, then picked up her glass and took a long drink to give herself a breathing space. That did it. When she got out of here, she was going to have to force some information out of Tavra. Somehow. This was too much.

After waiting for further response from Jenny, Lady Sarek studied her with keenly perceptive eyes, and then apparently gave up. She began to make definite "How nice you *were* able to come" remarks.

Jenny grasped thankfully at the opportunity. She rose, threw in a curtsy, just on general principles, and said, "It was so kind of you to invite me, my lady," before Lady Sarek could change her mind.

"I enjoy meeting new people, particularly when they're so--informative," Lady Sarek said, with the barest hint of sarcasm in her soft voice. "You're remarkably discreet, my dear. I trust Commander Slair appreciates it."

"Thank you." Jenny wasn't sure she'd really heard that last remark correctly. She hastily said a final goodbye and left the room.

Tavra was waiting in a small anteroom off the entrance hall. If Tavra weren't a Vulcan, Jenny would have said she looked nervous. Considering the nature of the ambassador's wife, Jenny didn't blame Tavra a bit for a little emotionalism.

"Well," said Jenny as she approached Tavra, "I must say--"

"Not here!" said Tavra with low-voiced urgency.

Jenny looked at Tavra's face, and cast a glance around the anteroom. Then she closed her mouth firmly and silently accompanied Tavra out to the groundcar. When they were sealed inside, and the air of taut strain left Tavra, Jenny said, "That woman is a real menace."

Tavra tensed again. "You did not, I trust, antagonize the ambassador's wife? You were polite, and answered her without undue levity?"

Jenny stopped gazing out the window and twisted to look at Tavra. "Levity? Is that a joke? Lady Sarek is *not* what I'd call amusing. You wouldn't believe what she wanted to know about Commander Slair."

"Yes I would," said Tavra flatly. "What did you say to her?"

"What could I say? I haven't the slightest idea what he does all day besides those stupid reports. I said I didn't know. I said I wasn't sure. I said he didn't confide in me. Oh, yes--I also said I'd never noticed."

"And Lady Sarek's reaction to your lack of response?" There was a note of apprehension in Tavra's voice.

Jenny shot a glance at Tavra, leaned back on the padded seat, and relaxed. After what she hoped seemed like a very long moment to Tavra, she said, "She commended my remarkable discretion."

Tavra's face became rigidly masklike. Jenny was sure the Vulcan woman was stunned. It was all the satisfaction Jenny was apt to get. Damn it, she *needed* someone to share the events of the past two days. Tavra staring blankly at her was no substitute for--

Jenny firmly suppressed that line of thought and switched to English. "Sarek *and* Amanda. And none of you would understand why it's so funny in a million years." Jenny noted with malicious pleasure that Tavra was apparently so taken aback by Lady Sarek's description of Jenny as 'discreet' that there was no reflexive "Speak Standard."

"You did very well, then," Tavra said.

It was Jenny's turn to stare in surprise. Tavra had practically *thanked* her. Then Jenny's eyes narrowed and she leaned forward, abandoning any thoughts of spending the ride gawking at alien scenery.

*You owe me one, lady*, she thought grimly. *And I'd better collect while you still remember it.*

"Tavra?"

"Yes, lady?"

"What's going on around here, anyway?" Jenny's tone was urgent. "All those peculiar questions-- What the hell did Lady Sarek mean by calling the commander a 'dashing raid-leader'?" At least that was a starting point.

Tavra lifted an eyebrow. "It was his position on his last ship, before his promotion. You must know that."

"Why must I? I know he got a promotion a little while ago, but that's all. Nobody tells me anything!" Jenny pulled her voice back under control and added as calmly as she could, "And will you *please* tell me what's going on between him and the captain? Since I seem to be caught in the middle, I really think--"

"A whole month." Tavra shook her head. "You have been working for the commander for a month, and you still don't know. You are--"

"Know how? Know what?" Jenny clasped her hands tightly in her lap, pressing her fingers painfully. "First I didn't know who to talk to, and then you two wouldn't let me talk to anyone. Snide comments, obscure references, mysterious fights-- It's like living in a goddamned Gothic novel!"

"A what?"

The sound of Tavra's voice dragged Jenny back from the brink of long-suppressed hysterics. She took a deep breath and bit hard on her lip. She had to stay calm and give Tavra a good reason to tell her. Relying on the Vulcan's quite possibly non-existent gratitude was far too chancy.

"Never mind," said Jenny. "It's just a kind of book. Look, Tavra, you should tell me what kind of a mess this really is. Just think what kind of trouble I could have run into with Lady Sarek because I didn't have the vaguest idea--"

"All right," said Tavra. "What do you want to know?"

Resisting a frustration-born impulse to say, '*Everything!*', Jenny hesitated. "So the commander was recently promoted." That much she'd gathered a while back. "Why the--the antagonism--"

Tavra raised her eyebrows, and then her expression relaxed somewhat. "We--the commander was already in the position he desired. When this promotion was forced through--"

"Forced? Why forced?"

Tavra eyed her steadily for a minute and then seemed to come to a decision. "Fleet Command wants no private loyalties to an officer among a crew, particularly when that officer is a Vulcan. The commander is--generally--a good man to follow. And his former captain--"

*Started feeling a knife buried right between his shoulder blades, I should think.* Jenny didn't blame him.

"I see," she said to Tavra. "But didn't he want to be a commander, and third officer?"

Tavra shook her head. "Not at present. Keeping up such a rank is time consuming and expensive."

"Private operatives?" Jenny said, taking a reasonable guess. "Me? I can see having his own guards. But why bother with this officer's lady nonsense if he didn't want to?"

"It is expected. The Empire prefers that its citizens conform to its standards."

Jenny shot a sharp look at Tavra. *And the Vulcans don't like that much, do they? I'll bet the Empire keeps an eagle eye on you people. I sure as hell would.*

"Then why didn't he pick a Vulcan woman? Why not just assign Tenaya to the job? Wouldn't that be more logical?"

"We have more important things to do than act as ornaments of rank." Tavra paused, then added, "Most Vulcan officers in the Imperial Fleet hire aliens when they must employ an officer's lady."

This was more information in one lump than Jenny'd obtained in the previous month. Commander Slair and Tavra had been telling her what they thought she needed to know. This frequently differed drastically from what *she* thought she needed to know. She only wished each of Tavra's statements didn't lead off into at least six other areas.

"And Captain len Ronan doesn't like the commander--because of what happened on the last ship?" said Jenny.

With a supercilious lift of her brows, Tavra said, "What do you think?"

Jenny looked at Tavra, glanced out the window of the car, and said in English, "I think I'm losing my chance to see some real alien scenery because I'm trying to pry information out of you, damn it!"

"Speak Standard." Tavra was sounding less and less cooperative. She added, with a touch of irritation, "Commander Slair was not interested in being forced to add an alien female to his--"

"Problems?" Jenny suggested.

Tavra's mouth thinned. "The commander thought that he could ignore Fleet's 'requests' as conveyed through the captain. Fleet put pressure on the captain, who regarded the confiscation of the ship you were on as an ideal opportunity for the commander to--"

"I see." Jenny saw, all right.

Commander Slair had been forcibly removed from his little band of loyal henchmen, and tied down to administrative details on a new ship. Captain len Ronan, being a sadist and no fool, was keeping his new third officer firmly in place and enjoying every minute of it. And she was caught right smack in the middle, since the question of a 'lady' was the overt quarrelling-point. Now there was a sweet, reassuring thought for you.

"Oh, I see," Jenny repeated slowly. "Tavra?"

"What is it now?"

"Speaking of that slave-ship--the *Victory* stopped them, and impounded everything in sight, right?"

"Well, why? It wasn't because slavery's illegal and immoral. You people were planning to resell everyone on board yourselves. Were they drug-running or what?"

For a minute, she thought Tavra wasn't going to bother to answer. Then Tavra said, "That ship was endeavoring to run without proper area

clearances. When checked, it was discovered that they were dealing without proper licensing, and had evaded duties and taxes on their last shipment. Naturally, its cargo was confiscated and its crew placed under arrest."

"Unpaid taxes?" said Jenny blankly.

"It is not wise to attempt to defraud the Empire." Tavra's tone indicated that, so far as she was concerned, the conversation was over.

"Taxes," Jenny repeated. Turned away from Tavra, she leaned her head against the cool window. "Taxes," she said again. *The IRS--the Imperial Revenue Service.* She put a hand over her mouth to stop a semi-hysterical giggle. "I can't stand it. Taxes."

"Shut up." Tavra was back to normal.

Jenny stared almost blindly out the window. Tax evasion--and so she'd wound up as pawn in a power-play between a furiously resentful Vulcan and his viciously careful new captain. Fantastic. She closed her eyes tightly for a moment and then spent what was left of the trip staring moodily out at the city.

Back on the ship that evening, Jenny still felt depressed and deflated as she sat at dinner with Commander Slair. Not for the first time, she was glad he preferred to eat in his own quarters rather than in the officers' dining room. It was so much easier on her nerves.

She rested her elbow on the table, leaned her chin on her hand, and poked at the meat on her plate. *Vegetarians. Pacifism. Logic. Sure.* She glanced across the table at the commander. At least a number of things about him were finally more or less comprehensible.

Vulcan or no Vulcan, he'd been having such a screaming fight with Captain Ien Ronan that he'd acted with what even Jenny, now that she knew what being an 'officer's lady' entailed, considered extreme stupidity. The captain had finally managed to force the commander to comply with his 'requests', in the process infuriating the commander past reason.

At that point, Jenny wondered what in God's name Ien Ronan had been doing to drive the commander to that pitch of hatred. She shot another slanting glance at Commander Slair and decided that, all things considered, she'd just as soon never find out.

Furious at being forced to give in, Commander Slair had simply picked out the first woman he saw and then almost ignored her existence. Since he couldn't have gotten this far in the Imperial Fleet if he customarily acted like such a moron--and Jenny couldn't imagine Tavra sticking with the commander for years if he were really a jerk--

*Picking me up without questioning me must be the stupidest thing he's ever done.* Jenny studied Commander Slair cautiously. *That was probably the maddest he's ever been in his entire life.*

He'd lost and he'd been sulking. And that had saved her from several fates she did not like to contemplate. That it had created a number of little problems for the commander bothered her not at all. *Serves him right. After all, he'll just dump me somewhere in a couple of months, probably with no visible means of support, either.*

That was another thing she didn't want to think about.

Jenny stared down at her plate. She had the firm conviction that this whole mess was STAR TREK's fault. She didn't know how, and she didn't know why. But it had to be *somebody's* fault.

"And after this last month," she muttered bitterly in English, "if I ever get home, I shall devote my life to hunting down Gene Roddenberry and murdering him. Slowly."

Commander Slair set his glass down hard on the table.

"Sorry," Jenny said automatically.

He stared at her, his hand wrapped tightly around his glass. "Repeat your previous statement. In Standard."

"It's not important. I swear it wasn't a joke."

"I said, 'Repeat it'."

Jenny shrugged one shoulder. "I just said I'd like to strangle Gene Roddenberry. I should live so long."

Commander Slair eyed her consideringly. "Gene Roddenberry." He gave the name an extremely odd inflection. "I wonder." He fixed his eyes grimly on Jenny's face. "Where did you come in contact with that person?"

"I met him at a convention in--" She jerked upright. "Now, wait a min--"

"Do you know his whereabouts?"

Jenny stared at the Vulcan. "Last I heard, he was in Los Angeles. Why on--"

Commander Slair uncurled his fingers from the glass. He stood up and went to his desk. "Come here."

Jenny shoved back her chair and joined him. He tapped the computer viewer. After he'd recited a lengthy code, the screen cleared to show the image of a man in Imperial uniform.

"Well? Is that the man?"

Jenny stared at the vivid picture. She opened her mouth, shut it, shook her head vigorously, and looked at the screen again. "What--" It

was more of a squeak than a word. She tried again. "What are you doing with a picture of Roddenberry? He's a real person. I mean, a human. From Earth. Who, what, *why*--"

"Stop babbling. Losangeles. Where is it?"

"California. It's a city. Do you mean to tell me that *Gene Roddenberry's* an *alien*?"

"A city on your planet. Where is it?"

Staring in excited confusion at the viewer, Jenny said, "Now that's a stu-- I mean, how do I know? I don't even know where *we* are. Or where I was when you stopped that other ship. If Roddenberry belongs to you people, what the hell is he doing on Earth?"

"The result of a lack of judgment." He turned off the viewer.

"What'd he do, run off with half the Imperial wine cellar?"

"No. Tell me what you know about--Roddenberry." Again the odd pronunciation.

"He's a television producer. He's the one who--" Jenny stopped, trying to work something out. "Wait a minute, Commander. It can't be the same person. They must just look alike." And the names also coincidence? Come on, now.

"Oh, really?" Commander Slair lifted one eyebrow. "Why?"

"I've read biographies of him. I even know people who knew him years and years ago."

The corner of Commander Slair's mouth twitched up. "Money and drugs. The combination can provide the most amazing documentation--and memories. After all this time, I'm surprised he's not running the planet. Go on. 'He's the one who--'?"

"He's the one who produced STAR TREK. I heard him talk at a couple of conventions."

"What is STAR TREK?" said Commander Slair.

"It's a TV show. An--an entertainment, like those tri-dee cassettes. Roddenberry created it, it was marvelous, it was all about--" She stopped.

"About what?"

Jenny succumbed. "About this." She waved her hands expansively. "Spaceships. Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. The *Enterprise* warping around the universe, nobly saving the galaxy, with Kirk breaking the Prime Directive all the way--"

"Breaking the what?"



"The Noninterference Directive," Jenny said impatiently. "It was a great show. I adored it. That's how I knew you people were Vulcans, and what the ship was like. You're all nothing but a bunch of fictional characters, figments of our warped fannish minds--"

"Quiet," said Commander Slair sharply as she stopped to breathe. There was a brief silence. Then he said, "Sit down. I want a complete explanation. A coherent one."

Jenny flung herself onto the couch and curled up, determined to get her talking in before he started with the 'Shut up' routine again. "Got ten or twelve years? Go ahead. Ask me anything. I know so many thoroughly useless things about TREK it would appall you. What do you want to--"

"I do not doubt it." He added suddenly, "Do you mean that your-- your calm acceptance of this ship, its technology, my species--this was because Roddenberry had turned the Imperial Fleet into a tri-dee show?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes." Jenny turned a snicker into a cough at the sight of his face. He didn't appear to appreciate the humorous aspect of this. "That is, sort of."

"So Roddenberry had his little joke. He turned the *Enterprise* into amusement for a planet of barbarians." Commander Slair sat down beside Jenny.

"Oh, no. We all loved them madly. Or, in Spock's case, logically," she added. "'At the time, it seemed the logical thing to do', you know. The number of stories about that man's love life and innumerable *pon farrs*-- I mean--"

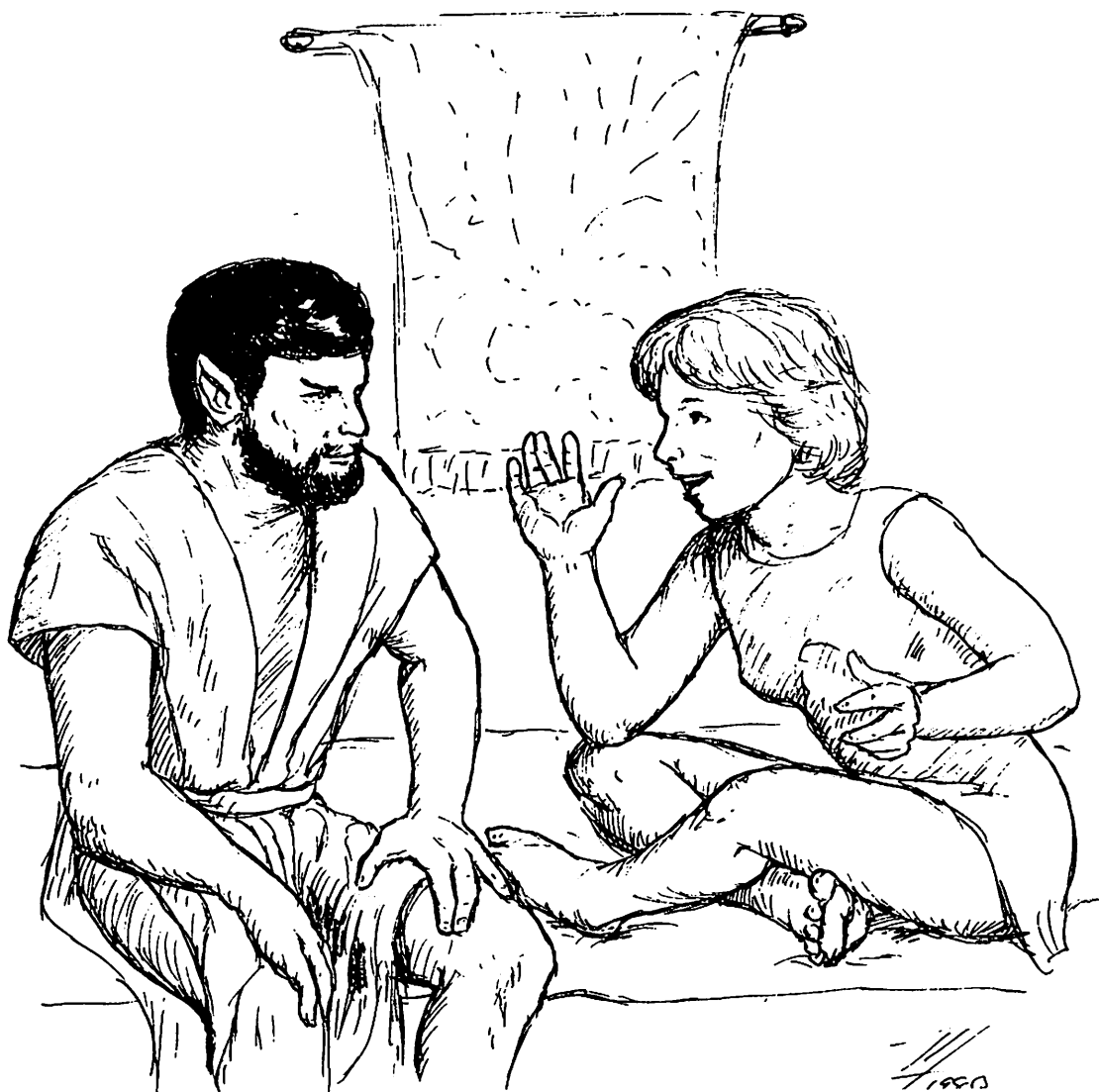
"What?" He stopped, then continued, mouth slightly clenched. "So. Roddenberry is at present located on this Earth of yours, making a living at this STAR TREK about the Empire. I wish to know--"

"Don't worry, the Empire's little secrets are safe. You people were only in one episode. Used to be one of my favorites, too, but I think I'm going to transfer my allegiance to something on a higher plane, like 'Spock's Brain'--"

"If it is *not* about the Empire," Commander Slair said, slowly closing his hands on the belt of his long green tunic, "Why did you know about us? You said it was about-- 'saving the galaxy'?"

"Noticed that, huh? Well, it was about the good old United Federation of Planets, with its faithful starship *Enterprise*. The Empire was only in 'Mirror, Mirror', as the--some of us really liked that episode. There were a lot of stories written about it. There's something about gold lamé that gets them every time."

"Us?" he said. "Stories?"



"There were only seventy-nine episodes," Jenny said. "We ran out of TREK, so we started writing our own TREK stories." She shifted to sit cross-legged on the couch, facing him, and leaned forward eagerly, interspersing her commentary with waves of her hands.

"You see, what Roddenberry didn't tell us on the show, we made up. Almost every fan wrote at least *one* story, no matter how awful, and that's not even counting the pro-published stuff, which you can't really, it's so bad. Eventually there were hundreds of stories. Thousands of stories. Millions and--well, thousands, anyway, by this time. I had a collection of fanzines you wouldn't believe. My parents didn't believe it."

Jenny paused for breath again, and added, in a fairminded fashion, "Of course, I haven't even mentioned the artwork yet. There's quite a bit of that, too. Well, there are millions of people who love STAR TREK. And Klingons. And Rom--"

"Klingons." Commander Slair looked rather taken aback at Jenny's passionate outburst of information.

"Klingons are neat," Jenny said with great firmness.

"I fail to see--"

"They wear gold lamé too, which may account for it, of course. But most people go for the Vulcans. Although I prefer the stuff about Sarek and Amanda. I got awfully tired of Vulcans after Kraith went so overboard with the 'Spock as the one true knight' routine."

Commander Slair was staring at her as if mesmerized. "What is Kraith?"

"As far as I can tell, it's a sentient ceramic cup that sort of keeps the Vulcans from going crazy. Every fifty-three, or maybe it's fifty-seven, years, there's this Affirmation thing. Jacqueline Lichtenberg writes that, or at least she started it, and a lot of other people have jumped in as writers. I have to admit, the Kraith Vulcans are really weird and alien, even if they aren't much like the ones on the show, and Spock came off as even more of a sanctimonious prig than he did on the episodes--"

"Spock?" Commander Slair asked, as Jenny paused for a desperately-needed breath.

"Commander Spock?" Jenny said hopefully. "'The best first officer in the Fleet'? The *Enterprise's* first officer and science officer? The--"

"The son or Sarek and Amanna," he finished softly. "So you *are* talking about Port Admiral Spock." The corner of his mouth curved up.

"But of course ninety percent of all fans adore Spock madly anyway," she reassured him earnestly. "In Kraith, he's set up as the sort of savior of all Vulcan, not to mention the galaxy, even if he can't get along with his father. And how Sarek ever got to be an ambassador when he can't seem to stay on speaking terms with half the population of the universe is beyond me. Maybe they just wanted to get him off Vulcan. We used to say that Sarek and Spock hadn't said anything to each other for eighteen years but 'Pass the salt'--"

Jenny ran out of breath again. As she took in the expression on Commander Slair's face, she leaned back and stared at him suspiciously.

*My God, he thinks that's funny!* she thought with a burst of revelation. *Why, I don't think he LIKES Sarek. I bet he thinks Spock IS a--a sanctimonious prig!* She struggled, unsuccessfully, to keep a grin off her face. She caught Commander Slair's eye, and fastened her teeth in her lower lip to keep from laughing.

"All right," he said. "Since you cannot locate it for me, I want to know how to recognize your solar system. You will record all items of information that you have."

"So *now* you're interested. Boy, good old Gene must really be hot. I bet Kirk and Spock would just adore seeing some of those shows--not to mention some of those fanzines. Some of those stories--"

Commander Slair eyed her coldly, all traces of what she'd decided was amusement gone. "You will tell no one about this, either. You will never mention Roddenberry's name."

"Not even Tavra?" Jenny was convinced that Tavra's life would be incomplete if she never heard of STAR TREK.

"She will undoubtedly need to be informed," Commander Slair said, with what Jenny was morally sure was reluctance. "If only to enable her to monitor your frequently unconsidered comments."

That was totally unfair. Nobody'd let her say more than two words put together for a month.

"A tri-dee show?" Tavra said a short time later. With a careful lack of expression, she turned and surveyed Jenny. "A tri-dee show."

Tavra's expression was everything for which Jenny had uncharitably hoped. Commander Slair had undoubtedly intended the STAR TREK story to justify himself to Tavra. Most unfortunately, it was one of those explanations that sounded even worse than the original stupidity.

"If that is all?" Tavra said.

*I bet this is turning her stomach,* Jenny thought with delight. *The commander'll probably have her resignation on his desk in the morning.*

Commander Slair nodded, and Tavra stalked out, back stiff.

"Oh, dear," said Jenny in English. Then she put her hand to her mouth, smothering a giggle.

"It is not funny," said Commander Slair, rounding on her. "Stop that."

"Yes, Commander," she said, trying to wipe the grin from her face.

After a glance at the clock on the desk, he added, "Further discussion of this matter will be deferred until tomorrow." He headed for the bedroom.

"All right," said Jenny amiably, following him. The delay would give her time to decide what, if anything, she was going to give as identification marks for Earth and the Sun. What with a ringed planet in the system, and all those distinctive continents on Earth, it would be a hard system to miss.

Once in the bedroom, Commander Slair began undressing. "And I do not wish to hear any more about this--STAR TREK."

"What, never?" Jenny peeled off her robe, tossed it in the general direction of the chair, and bounced onto the bed.

"Well," he began, then stopped short.

Jenny informed him cheerfully, but in English, "You, Commander, must be pretty well punch-drunk," before flopping back onto the pillow. She was starting to feel incredibly tired. *I'm out of practice, that's what it is. I haven't been able to talk that much for ages.*

Commander Slair ignored her remark, sliding into bed beside her and waving out the light. There were a few moments of silence.

"I confess to a certain curiosity," he said. "One of your more random remarks concerning--what is *pon farr*?"

Jenny finally exploded. She rolled onto her stomach and tried, without much success, to muffle her laughter in the pillow. It was the first time she'd really laughed since she'd been taken from Earth, and she couldn't stop. She barely heard Commander Slair say, "Stop that."

Her laughter slowly wound down into a series of rather strangled, teary giggles. It finally ceased altogether, except for a few residual hiccups.

"I withdraw the question," he said.

That last burst of emotional release had completely exhausted her. She was falling into sleep. Then she jerked awake and stared into the dark.

*Dear God, what fools that man made of us. Ten years of my life, on a renegade Imperial officer's little joke.* She turned her face to the pillow and drew a long, sobbing breath.

"Will you go to sleep?" said Commander Slair.

By the time Commander Slair began intensive questioning, Jenny had come to the conclusion that it didn't make a damn bit of difference what she told him about Earth. The Empire didn't know where it was; the slavers must have successfully erased their records, preventing any backtracking. If and when the Empire ever did find Earth, there'd be precious little Earth could do against the Imperials.

So she was willing to tell him anything he wanted to know. He didn't need to use heavy-handed threats, he had only to stop telling her to shut up every time she opened her mouth. This eager cooperation seemed to disconcert him.

And she was absolutely delighted to tell him all about STAR TREK. For someone who didn't want to hear any more about it, Commander Slair had a strange fascination with the subject. Oh, he wanted her to tell

him about Earth--now that he thought it might be important. Some day. Maybe. But somehow the discussion always managed to veer around to STAR TREK sooner or later.

Fandom in all its aspects apparently intrigued him. Although he would pull her up sharply if he suspected her of wild invention, he generally listened with an attitude of amused skepticism.

"Well, actually, it wasn't seven hours Isabel and I spent hand-cranking her mimeo to get the zine out for that con," Jenny admitted.

"I thought not," said Commander Slair. "Now, what--"

"It was really about fourteen. But I didn't think you'd believe that." He still didn't, to judge by the look on his face. Jenny ducked her head to hide a grin.

There was the usual difficulty about the workings of fandom. It was odd how the same questions came up from non-fans, no matter what species they were.

"Commander, we don't *have* an organization." This was always hard to get across. She never had been able to make it clear to her former boss. "Honest. No organization. Anybody can run a STAR TREK convention. Hell, *you* could run one, if you were cr-- if you wanted to. All you need's a hotel and a printer."

But most material came from the episodes and fan stories. And once Jenny was quite sure Commander Slair really *didn't* like Spock, Sarek, or Amanda, she was more than willing to throw them to the wolves to keep him in a good mood. Of course, discussing Sarek and Amanda involved some fancy verbal footwork around the touchy subject of *pon farrn*, but Jenny managed.

As time went on, Jenny began to develop a vague, patchy picture of the relationship of STAR TREK to Imperial reality. It wasn't easy, since Commander Slair did not regard their evening talks as give-and-take conversation. Jenny had the feeling they came under the heading of 'light entertainment'--his. Commander Slair's comments tended to be maddeningly cryptic.

"Let's see . . . according to *The Making of STAR TREK*, Roddenberry was supposed to have been a pilot. And a police officer." Jenny's tone made it a question.

"True enough," Commander Slair said. "Now, you said--"

That sort of thing wasn't particularly enlightening. From the scraps of information she did get, it was plain that much of STAR TREK was sheer invention on Roddenberry's part. More was out-and-out malicious jokes, with the Empire as the butt. All those crazy, overdone hairdos on the

actresses were a prime example. *Officer's lady hairdos on working women. Ouch.*

The touchstone to reality was Spock. *'The first time I saw Nimoy, I wanted to put ears on him.'* Dear old Roddenberry, or whatever the hell his name is. Spock--the *only* character constant since the very first series proposals.

Jenny's assurances that Spock and Sarek had been the two most popular characters met with distinct skepticism from Commander Slair.

"I still fail to understand why," he said.

"We all admired his, er, mind," Jenny said earnestly.

Commander Slair lifted one eyebrow, plainly unconvinced. Jenny grinned at him. Things had improved immeasurably these past few weeks, ever since he'd developed his perverted interest in STAR TREK.

Although Jenny did not come into much contact with the rest of the ship's personnel, it was impossible for her to be kept completely confined to Commander Slair's quarters. When she did go out, it was always under Tavra's eagle-eyed supervision. Occasionally Jenny wondered what the hell the other people on the ship thought about this, but she doubted she'd ever find out.

After one excursion to the gymnasium, Jenny returned to the cabin shaking her head slightly. The main room was empty, but when she went to the bedroom she found Commander Slair standing by the large closet. He was pulling on the long green tunic he often wore.

"For someone who's so damn fond of blue--" she said, before she could stop herself.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said hastily. "I just meant to say, that's a nice color. Look, Commander, I was just down at the gym with Tavra and the captain's wo-- *Aldith* was there. She invited me to some sort of card party. Do I have to go?"

Commander Slair frowned slightly. "What did you tell her?"

"I kicked her on the ankle and said I'd hate it like poison, of course," Jenny said impatiently. Commander Slair's mouth tightened, and she hurriedly added, "Just joking."

"Don't."

She gave an inward sigh. "Tavra didn't say anything, so I smiled at Aldith and told her I wasn't very good at cards--I didn't add that I

think most card games are deathly boring--but that I'd be delighted to go. Then I told her I'd have to ask you before I said yes." And dear Aldith's comments on *that* statement--

His mouth relaxed. "I'll tell her you won't be able to attend."

"Good," she said with relief. Commander Slair raised his eyebrows, and she said, "Most card games are deadly and Aldith's--" It suddenly occurred to her that saying 'worse' might not be tactful and she tried to change it. "--uh, certainly a--"

"I agree," Commander Slair said.

Jenny stared at him.

He turned back to the closet and began looking through one of the drawers. "You are not under the authority of the captain's lady," he commented. "You need be polite, no more."

"Oh." Jenny went to her side of the bed, took the book she was currently struggling through from the shelf, and deposited herself on the bed to try again with the volume. Trying to learn to read Standard without benefit of hypnoteaching or any other help whatsoever was not easy. The commander and Tavra apparently didn't care that she wasn't literate in any Imperial language.

"We had a cat just like Aldith once," Jenny said absently after a few minutes.

Commander Slair looked up. "Yes?"

Why couldn't she keep her big mouth shut? "I just meant that she's as graceful, and--and as pretty--"

"Spare me your attempts at prevarication. Go on."

"Oh, all right." Jenny knew when she was stuck. "She's exactly like a little black cat we had. She was the smallest, and really cute, and she specialized in sneaking up behind the other cats and biting the tips of their tails when they were being combed. And in scratching your ankles when you had your hands full." She added defensively, "Well, you asked!"

The side of his mouth curved up slightly. "It seems an apt description. Do not repeat it," he added in a colder tone.

During those long, intimate talks she had with everyone else on the ship, no doubt. *Now, really, Commander--*

"I'm not a complete fool," Jenny said, and wished she hadn't.

But he only regarded her with a plainly dubious expression, and turned back to the closet drawer. Jenny closed her eyes thankfully, reminding herself once again to be careful--no matter how amiable the



commander might seem when listening to her in the evenings.

Conversations with Commander Slair in the evenings, Tavra's instruction, and swimming still left Jenny with time on her hands. She spent most of it learning to read Imperial Standard and to understand Vulcan. She spent hours each day on these two projects, with an intense application and diligence she'd seldom expended on anything but fanac. It seemed to be paying off astonishingly well, too. With time, motivation, and access to a library of tapes, she was achieving what she modestly regarded as amazing results.

And then, of course, there were the planetside parties, or balls, or receptions, or whatever. The *Victory* was patrolling a well-settled and populous sector, and the officers and their ladies attended what Jenny considered an ungodly number of official functions.

Or, as Commander Slair said, "What else is there to do with a peacetime military?"

She rested her arm on the table, propped her head on her hand, and made a studious effort to look enthralled. It was truly amazing how quickly affairs that should have been incredibly exotic, alien, and, above all, interesting, had turned into such colossal bores.

*Alien and exotic and boring. God. If I see another 'Orion' dancer, I'm going to throw up.* Jenny sighed and tried to stretch unobtrusively.

"What is it?" said Commander Slair.

"Destiny dances better than that," she said, staring gloomily at the sinuous dancers.

"Be quiet," he said coldly, and turned back to his interrupted discussion of shipping routes.

Jenny bit her lip and straightened, clasping her hands. Commander Slair seemed about nine thousand times less approachable in public in that formidable dress uniform than he did in civilian clothes in his quarters.

This was the fourth such formal affair she'd been dragged to in the past few weeks. The first *had* been fascinating. But by now . . . well, she'd never liked cocktail parties, even on Earth, and merely moving them to another planet didn't improve them any. There was a real limit to the number of times what was basically a group of people repeating gossip could be regarded with the obligatory sense of wonder.

These occasions were not only dull, they were intimidating. These people were the wealthy, the powerful, the aristocracy; a level of society

Jenny knew only from books. She felt hideously out of place among them, a provincial *bourgeoise* dropped into the court of the Tsar of All the Russias.

Jenny gradually found herself leaning her head on her hand again. *Will somebody please tell me what the hell I'm doing here? I don't belong in a setup like this. Well, at least there aren't those couch-things this time.*

At the *last* banquet, the local fashion had been long, low, padded benches, lending a touch of ancient Rome to outer space. Jenny had fallen asleep. Commander Slair had not been pleased.

*How the hell he expects me to stay awake this late, in this dim light, without anybody to talk to, is beyond me.* Jenny drowsily studied one of the glowing lamps. That gradual shift from soft gold to flame was soothing. . . .

Some time later, she was jarred by a sharp blow on her ankle. Her head jerked up and she looked at Commander Slair with indignation that quickly faded at the sight of his face. "I wasn't asleep!"

"No?" he said softly.

"I'm awake," she said pleadingly.

"Are you?" he said. He kicked her ankle again. "Stay that way."

Jenny pressed her lips tightly together and stared at her hands. *I hope you drop dead, Commander. I hope the captain kills you. I hope you get run over by a truck. See if I tell you any more about STAR TREK. You bastard.*

"Do I really have to wear all that?" Jenny regarded the jewelry without interest.

"Yes," Tavra said.

"I thought the commander said this was a frontier colony." Jenny shrugged, and picked up the ornate earrings. "I suppose it's to impress the hell out of the natives. Full dress uniforms again, too, I bet."

She stared at the earrings in her hand. The *Victory* had just ferried supplies and government officials to one of the Empire's newer acquisitions. The delivery was to be accompanied planetside by an assortment of crew and officers, complete with private henchmen and ornaments. Commander Slair was going. That meant that Jenny followed.

Another planet she'd stand on but never see. In the past two months, she'd been on a space station and half a dozen assorted planets, and the ship. All the wonders of the galaxy, and what had she seen?

*Cocktail parties. Receptions. Balls where I can't dance. Alien planets, and I never even get to walk on the funny-colored grass. Jenny's hand closed over the earrings, grinding them into her palm. And always, always, someone watching her.*

"Stop wasting time," Tavra said.

At least Tavra wasn't going along this time. It was amazing for what small favors Jenny was now grateful.

After arrival at the major town, there was a long, dull period of standing around. There were preliminary introductions, speeches of incredible banality, and a short tour of the few points of interest.

Jenny's spirits began to rise. She ignored the verbiage in favor of surreptitious gawking. This was the closest to seeing any of these planets she'd been yet. Usually she'd been indoors.

But here even this, the primary population center, wasn't much more than a village. She could see open country at the ends of some of the streets. Maybe now, at last, she'd be able to do some wandering around. It would be particularly nice here. No one was looking at her, so she allowed herself one bounce to try the lighter gravity. She grinned at the sensation, then checked it, meeting Commander Slair's sharp glance with a questioning look.

By the time the gilt-edged red tape was over, Jenny had developed a fixed intention of using this rural planetfall to explore a strange new world. There didn't seem to be any reason against it. She wouldn't even mind the tag-along guard she'd be saddled with. And Commander Slair had been acting like a perfectly normal, reasonable person for at least a week. Besides, he owed her *something* for telling him all about 'get-Spock' and 'Lieutenant Mary Sue' stories the other day.

Commander Slair was finally freed, and they headed for a building that Jenny instantly recognized as a motel.

"Holiday Interstellar, huh?" she said after one glance at the building.

"What?" said Commander Slair. .

Jenny opened her mouth, then closed it in frustration.

"Another of your untranslatable jokes?" he said.

"How did--" If he started regarding any remark she made in English as a rude joke, she was going to be in trouble. She needed *some* emotional outlet.

"That peculiar expression of bafflement is extremely revealing."

"I just wanted to ask about that building. . . ."



Commander Slatc

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"A hotel. Owned by one of the Empire's larger business concerns."

"I thought so," Jenny said with a certain amount of satisfaction.

Two of the operatives that had accompanied them down remained at the car. The others, a tall Vulcan and a stocky, muscular human, followed Commander Slair and Jenny up a half-flight of stairs to a suite of rooms. The human stationed himself outside the door, while the Vulcan entered and seated himself on the couch in the main room.

Jenny followed Commander Slair into a bedroom and closed the door. She leaned back on it for a second and took a deep breath, looking at the sweep of wooded countryside visible beyond the window. "Oh, boy," she said. She shoved herself from the door, pulled off earrings, neckband, and elaborate belt, and tossed them unceremoniously on the bed.

"What are you doing?" Commander Slair was regarding her with slight curiosity.

Jenny stopped her hasty search through the clothes Tavra had sent down for her. "Isn't there anything here besides party--" No, of course not. "Oh, the hell with it, this'll do."

She pulled out the dark blue, green-and-silver trimmed tunic and pants. They were dumped by the little heap of jewelry on the bed. She began to unfasten and shrug out of her dress. "I want to go out and look around. I can't go exploring in this." She gestured at the dress. "I wish I had some jeans, damn it."

"Exploring?"

She didn't like that tone at all. "Can't I? There are--"

"No."

"No?" It was unreasonable to feel so cheated, but she'd convinced herself that this time would be different. "All right, how about later?"

Commander Slair shook his head. "I can't spare anyone. You will remain here."

"The whole time?" She tried hard not to sound indignant.

"Unless your presence is required at one of the official functions." He looked at her, and added, "It is necessary to leave adequate personnel on the ship. I have too few operatives here to waste one as your escort."

"Goddamn it to--" Jenny cut herself off in mid-expletive and switched back to Standard. "There are two of them here. One inside and one outside. Why can't one of them be my keeper?"

"Sendak is off-duty." Commander Slair extracted one of his many sets of filetapes from a closet drawer and turned to the door. There

he stopped and looked back. "There are some tapes and a viewer in the top drawer."

Jenny stared in surprise as the door closed behind him. *All that STAR TREK must have softened his brain.*

"Oh, *shit*." She sat on the bed, absently kicking at the blue folds of skirt tangled around her feet. She didn't see why whatever malignant entity that was playing with her destiny insisted on handing her priceless opportunities and then sadistically whipping them away whenever she tried to grasp them.

It didn't even have the common decency to be pouring rain. It was one of the loveliest days she'd ever seen.

"I might as well be in--in New Jersey!" Jenny said with great bitterness. "Damn, damn, *damn*!" She stood up, kicked the dress the rest of the way off, and yanked on tunic and pants, snarling to herself the whole time.

Then she stalked over to the closet. "And now for a perfectly charming time with *6,000 Years of Dull Imperial Etiquette in 10 Easy Lessons*. Thank you so much, Commander. Paranoid bastard."

Her attention sidetracked briefly as she tried to repeat the phrase in Imperial Standard. There seemed to be no word corresponding to 'paranoid'.

"That figures." She flung herself into a chair, resentment in every move. "It's not *fair*, damn it!"

Half an hour later, she had spent five minutes with the tape and twenty-five prowling back and forth in front of the window. She stopped for a moment, leaning her hands on the sill. It was so beautiful out--

An iridescently-winged something flashed by the window, swooped up, and sailed into a nearby clump of trees.

That did it. All her rebellious resentment solidified. Tense, hands clenched at her sides, she repeated, "It's not *fair*."

She spun around. Two long strides took her to the bed. She scooped up the jewelry that lay glittering there and threw it viciously into the top drawer. The viewer and booktapes followed. She stared at the drawer for a second, then slammed it shut. "Goodbye. I'm going for a walk. All by myself. Alone. Goddamn it, I'm twenty-six years old, not three-and-a-half!"

Of course, she had to get out of the hotel first. The guards would never let her out the door of the suite in a million years. But there was another exit--maybe. Jenny went back to the window.

It was doubtless equipped with the latest thing in intruder alarms. But those were usually meant to keep someone out. In a hotel, it should surely be possible to open a window from inside without waking the entire neighborhood.

Jenny experimented cautiously with the controls in the side moldings. When the window slid sideways into the wall, she looked quickly at the door, holding her breath. The next few minutes paced slowly by with no indication of an alarm, and no sign of interest from the operatives.

"Well, well," said Jenny in triumph. So they weren't quite as smart and suspicious as they thought they were.

Elation faded as she looked down out of the window. There was only one way to the ground--hang and drop. It shouldn't be too difficult, since they were only about ten feet up. That meant an actual drop of about four or five feet. And this gravity was a bit light, so maybe she *wouldn't* break her ankles.

That left only one little problem: getting back in. The gravity here was lower, but not low enough for her to jump ten feet straight up and climb back in the window. Once out, she'd have to return by the door.

Jenny stared down at the ground. If she were lucky, really lucky, she'd be back before Commander Slair returned, whenever that was supposed to be. If not--

She took a deep breath of warm fresh air, and set her teeth. "Okay. If he gets back first, he will undoubtedly hit you. It'll be worth it, damn it. I'm tired of getting pushed around."



Jenny spent an intoxicating couple of hours wandering around the nearby woods and fields. She had headed out into the countryside near the hotel, away from encounters with people. She'd had enough of these citizens of the galaxy to last her for years. She hadn't gone too far from the hotel, though. She hadn't gotten quite reckless enough to risk getting lost. With the captain here, Commander Slair would probably be obliged to come looking for her--a painful idea at best.

Satiated with fresh air and sun, she finally sat on the dark pinkish-gold mossy substance under a tree. *I do hope it IS a plant, and not an alien ambassador. Oh well--it didn't yell when I sat on it.*

She grinned, moderately tired but happy. It was the thought of sitting under an alien species of tree on another planet that thrilled her most. "Though considering the little I know about Earth's botany and whatnot, I could just as easily be in Brazil as on an alien planet." She patted the ground approvingly. But she *was* on an alien planet--the first one she'd been able to enjoy. "Goshgeegollywow. Sensawonda."

Leaning back against the tree, she looked up through the leaves. The sky was pale blue--with a greenish tinge, but definitely sky-blue. For an alien planet, it was almost mundanely normal looking. Just like all the others she'd been allowed to set foot on. She'd once asked Tavra why they never went to, say, a methane world, and had been squelched with, "Colonize an unsuitable planet like that? With the number of class-prime worlds available? Why waste the time, money, and manpower?"

*Stupid Vulcan*, Jenny thought, pulling up bits of the moss. *Methane worlds are for mining and--and miscreants.*

Jenny stayed resting quietly against the tree, enjoying the play of sun and shadow and wishing she could see one of the local animals. "Greedy, aren't you?" she said ruefully. "But not one of the fiercer animals, whoever's listening, okay?" Maybe, if she were absolutely still and very lucky, she might actually spot one.

Just when cramping muscles were about to force her to move, a rabbit-sized creature stepped into the small clearing near her tree. For a moment, Jenny couldn't figure out what was the matter with its motion. Then she realized the animal had six legs. It stopped and gazed around, its green-and-beige-mottled pelt fading into the light and shade of the woods. It froze as its large pale eyes spied Jenny.

She held her breath until the animal decided she was a harmless part of the scenery. It began nibbling daintily on the low branches at the edge of the clearing.

Jenny watched entranced until the animal suddenly lifted its head, looked wildly around, and leaped away. She half-expected it to fall flat, twined in extra legs.

There was no sign of what had startled it, but since it had moved, so would she. Jenny stretched and rose to her feet, brushing at her slacks. Seeing that little what's-it was amazing.

*First thing that's gone right since-- I suppose I should start back.* The way the shadows were stretching out for the evening was a depressing warning of the time.

She hesitated, hand on the rough bark of the tree. For a moment, the temptation to *not* go back was overwhelming. Just take off. Run. With luck, no one would find her.

And then what?



"With luck, you'd last about five minutes," she told herself with biting disgust. "What would you live on, poison ivy salad? Who do you think you are, Tarzan of the Apes?"

She took a last look around, then headed slowly back in the direction of the hotel.

*One story higher, just ONE--* As she approached the hotel, she was shaken by a full sense of what was beginning to seem stupidity of no mean order. If only they'd been on the fourth floor. Or the third, or even the second, damn it! She would never have tried this idiotic stunt then. Jenny pushed back her hair, squared her shoulders, and forced herself to head for the entrance before she completely lost her nerve.

The lobby was almost deserted. She avoided the few people there and managed to slither through and up the stairs without anything interesting occurring, such as running into Commander Slair.

*And now for the really fun part.* The thought was grim. It had been a lot easier to talk boldly of not caring about being hit when the prospect wasn't so imminent. There was nothing she could do about it. If only Commander Slair hadn't returned-- *Oh, you suicidal MORON! The guards will tell him!* She'd totally forgotten about them.

It was too late now. The guard at the door had straightened at the sound of her footsteps and looked in her direction. His face went classically blank, and his jaw dropped slightly.

Jenny walked up to the door, her pace slowing as she approached. She stopped in front of the guard--which one was this? Oh, right, Caldor. "Uh--is the commander back yet?"

"Where the hell--" Caldor shot a quick, fearful glance down the hall. "No, he isn't, and a damn good thing, too!" He looked again at Jenny, disbelief and growing anger in his eyes. Then he half-turned, still eyeing her, and opened the door. "Inside," he said. "*Lady!*"

Jenny lifted her chin and walked in.

The off-duty operative, Sendak, was still there on the couch, reading. As Jenny entered, closely followed by Caldor, he stared at her, looked at the closed door to the bedroom, and shot to his feet.

"What--" Sendak began.

Caldor shut the door. "Yes. That's what I said, too."

"Where have you been?" Sendak's voice was slow and cold.

"Out," Jenny said.

"What I want to know is *how*." Caldor planted himself in front of Jenny, hands on his hips.

Sendak moved to stand beside him. "The window, I surmise. I suppose you left it open?"

Jenny stared into Caldor's angry eyes, then looked up at Sendak. "Well," she began uncomfortably, "I--"

Sendak spun around and went into the bedroom. Jenny didn't need to be told it was to close the window.

He was back almost immediately. "I find it difficult to believe in such carelessness," he said.

"She *did* leave it open?" Caldor exchanged a long look with the Vulcan operative.

They both turned and stared at Jenny. Any thoughts of explaining that closing the window from the ground was impossible flew from her head.

"What the *hell* do you think you were doing?" Caldor exploded. "Are you out of your mind? Do you have the least idea what the commander would have done if he'd gotten back before you returned from this little expedition of yours?"

Jenny looked at the two men in uneasy surprise. "I don't see why you should care if he hits me."

"Lady," said Caldor through tight lips, "I couldn't care less if he flayed you alive. But I've got a good job with him, and I don't intend to lose it because you're too suicidal or too stupid to follow orders!"

Jenny took a step backward as he spoke. Aside from Tavra and Tenaya, Commander Slair's operatives had been distantly civil wallpaper. She didn't like this unaccustomed vehemence, and at the word 'stupid' she gave Caldor an angry look and started for the bedroom.

Sendak put out his arm. Jenny had to halt or run into it.

"I concur," Sendak told Caldor, and then turned to Jenny. "I also doubt that it would please the commander to be forced to discipline his operatives for your--whims."

"What do you have to do with it?" Jenny said uneasily.

"You have the nerve to ask that when he's given direct orders you go nowhere?" Caldor said. "I don't plan on paying for your mistakes."

"I sincerely trust you do not intend to continue acting in this imprudent manner." Sendak still barred Jenny's path to the bedroom. He eyed her for a moment. "It is apt to be unhealthy."

"Oh." She didn't care at all for the way the two men were studying her. She'd been under the impression that none of Commander Slair's operatives would ever bother her. She was beginning to get the horrible

feeling she'd been wrong. Like Commander Slair, she hadn't paid nearly enough attention to some people.

"Yes. So you can just stop playing this kind of cute trick." There was real fury in Caldor's voice.

Sendak glanced at him. "Careful."

"Easy for you to say--*you're* off-duty," Caldor snapped. "Do you want her pulling this kind of stunt again? We're just damn lucky he isn't back yet. That would have been great, wouldn't it? You're such a fast talker--do *you* want to try explaining something like this?"

"Definitely not," Sendak said.

"I think we'd better make sure she understands us." Caldor stepped closer to Jenny. "Listen, lady, if you ever, and I mean even when someone else is on, try anything like this again--"

"I'm sorry," said Jenny. "I didn't realize."

Caldor regarded her with incredulity. "This isn't the first time you've tried one of these games."

"What?" Jenny said, trying frantically to figure out what she should be apologizing about.

"I've seen what can happen when an officer's lady starts playing around like this," Caldor went on. His hand closed into a fist. "And I sure as hell don't want it happening here!"

Jenny could feel the blood slowly draining from her face and hands as Caldor stared at her. It had not for an instant occurred to her that her gesture of defiance would concern anyone but herself and Commander Slair. She wanted to be out of this, *now*. "I won't--"

"Damn right you won't," Caldor said.

Sendak regarded Caldor's tense body and clenched hands impassively. "It would be prudent not to leave any marks."

"You think he'd *notice*?" Caldor said with savage amusement.

Jenny took another quick step backward. Caldor's hand darted out and clamped onto hers. He jerked her toward him.

She tried to pull away. "Let me go!"

"Don't do it again," Caldor said with quiet viciousness. "Lady." His grip on her hand shifted, and he pressed down and twisted.

Burning pain drove Jenny halfway to her knees. Her sharply in-drawn breath turned to an agonized gulp.

Caldor released her. Jenny slowly straightened, her hand throbbing. She cradled her other hand protectively over it and stared at Caldor and Sendak through dazed, tear-filling eyes.

"Besides, Sendak, what's she going to say?" Caldor sounded almost cheerful. "Out the window. And left it open. After he told her to stay here. Sweet Deora!"

Sendak nodded. "We've been exceedingly lucky. If he had decided to return early. . . ."

"I'm getting back to my post before he comes strolling down the hall. No point pushing luck too far." At the door, Caldor turned to regard Jenny with grim satisfaction. "And if you've got any bright ideas about running to Slair with a rape story, you'd better forget it. Try anything like that and one of us will make damn sure you wish you hadn't."

When Jenny said nothing, he added, "You know, I'd almost *like* to see you complain. Who do you think he'd believe, lady--you or me?"

As the door closed firmly behind Caldor, Jenny found herself confronted by Sendak. "I suggest that you curb both your temper and your sadistic impulses," he said. "Unless you are completely insane."

He sounded very far off. Jenny blinked back tears and edged away, keeping her eyes on him. "But--" Her voice was hardly audible. "I only went for a walk."

"I do not know *why* you are trying to make us look careless and inefficient." The Vulcan operative's voice held dangerous cold anger. "Don't you know how dangerous that is? Or don't you care? Are you trying to get us all killed--including yourself?"

He studied her through narrowed eyes. "It's plain your position as the commander's lady has given you peculiar notions of your importance. Peculiar and unwarranted. As we all know, you are *only* his lady. And not, I should think, for long."

He moved slightly closer. "I do not think Commander Slair will tolerate such flagrant disobedience and stupidity from you."

The pain in her hand forgotten, Jenny couldn't take her eyes from Sendak's face. He sounded much more dangerous than Caldor--and he was a lot stronger. If Sendak lost his temper--

"But if he does not put a stop to this behavior of yours--we *will*." Sendak eyed her grimly for a minute. Then he returned to his interrupted position of ease on the couch.

Jenny stayed cautiously still until she was sure Sendak wasn't going to do anything else. When he displayed no further interest in her, she walked with slow care to the bedroom. Once inside, she closed the door and began shaking. She managed to get to the bed before collapsing, digging her hands into the coverlet in a vain attempt to control the trembling.

*Stupid. Stupid.* She buried her face on her folded arms, ignoring the sharp ache in her hand. *You had to be so damn smart.* As for those vicious, rotten operatives-- *"And that stupid window!" Who the hell ever heard of a hotel where the windows open, anyway!*

It was a little late now to think of all the things she should have said and done, or not done, but she spent the next few minutes doing it anyway. --*and I should have--oh, shit.* She rubbed her wet eyes on her arms, spreading dampness. *Okay, cut it out. If the commander walks in, even HE might notice there was something wrong.*

Well, at least those damned guards weren't going to tell him what had happened. So if she kept her mouth shut, Commander Slair was never going to find out anything about it. *Thank God. Boy, was I being stupid. If he found out, he'd KILL me.*

*Stupider than you know, Jenny.* She froze, fighting a dizzying, swinging feeling that she'd just dropped six feet and was fully awake for the first time in two months. *Well, of course he's planning to kill you. What did you expect? Of course. Oh, God, of course he is.*

Because she could expose that one instance of angry idiocy on his part. *Let me tell you about Commander Slair. If you can only get him mad enough, he'll get careless and do something incredibly stupid.*

He'd never take that risk. What had Sendak just said? Carelessness was dangerous-- *"Careless,"* said Jenny into the bedspread. She had just provided herself with an ideal bad example of *that*. *"I must be the stupidest person ever born."*

She shoved herself wearily upright and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the dresser. She was ice-pale, with tearmarks on her face.

Moving stiffly, she went into the bathroom. Cold water and towels should remove most of the evidence of this afternoon's experiences. *I hope.*

Later, Jenny stared unseeing into the mirror, methodically pulling a comb through her hair. The sickening physical sensations of sheer terror would fade, then sweep over her again every time she tried to think or to come up with a sensible plan of action. It was as bad as--no, *worse than--* the time she'd nearly been killed by a maniac running a red light. Fast reflexes had turned the collision into a spinning sideswipe that merely totalled the front end of her car. For weeks, her mind had insisted on rerunning that moment when she'd known there was no way to avoid a probably fatal crash. But at least she'd walked away from that one.

*Not this time.*

She'd been walking on razor blades and never noticed. Hadn't *wanted* to notice. All the evidence had been there. Commander Slair and Tavra had practically said it outright.

*The Scarlett O'Hara syndrome. If it's too awful, think about it later, later, later.*

She continued her mechanical combing. She'd ignored the evidence because, in the depths of her mind and heart, she *knew* this whole thing wasn't real; that when this episode, this story, was over, *something* would solve everything neatly, and all would be as it had been. At every point of real horror, she had been unconsciously comforted by the conviction that it was all a dream, that she had only to struggle awake to be safe.

She dropped the comb and put her hands over her mouth, fighting the sick and bitter taste. Because of that, today she had thrown away any chances she might have had to escape. She had always known that those 'guards' were jailors. Now they did, too. She was going nowhere now; the first thing Sendak had done when he closed the window was jam the lock. Nothing she'd tried would open the window again.

She'd never have another chance. The price of that afternoon of false freedom was going to be too damn high.

By the time Commander Slair returned, Jenny had attained a measure of rigid and monosyllabic composure. This carried her through the evening.

She spent most of the long formal dinner drinking. If the commander wanted her tonight, being drunk was the only way she'd be able to manage. Going to bed with a man who was perfectly nice, but was planning to cut your throat in four or five months just the same, was enough to turn a nymphomaniac frigid, let alone her.

Being drunk didn't help that much, after all.

"Stop sulking," Commander Slair told her just before he went to sleep. "There will be other planets."

Jenny lay staring up into the dark, trying to cope with a shattering feeling of mortality. No wonder Commander Slair and Tavra hadn't taught her anything but the absolute basics. Why waste the time? *And I'm no one and nothing here in the Empire. Nobody'll care if I'm killed.* She rolled over to bury her face hard in the pillow. *Oh, God--nobody'll even notice!*

After a moment, she turned her head cautiously to Commander Slair. Her revelation had been right, she was certain of that. But he'd been so--so--well, almost nice for the past month or so. Most of the time, he'd been perfectly amiable and pleasant.

*Why shouldn't he be? You do whatever he says. He told you he didn't like arguments. You know he's not a sadist. Why shouldn't he get what amusement he can, since he's stuck with you--and he's paying for it. The 'illogic of waste', remember? And it'll still be logical for him to kill you as soon as he can.*

And if he were a trifle squeamish about killing someone he'd been

sharing a bed with, which sounded damned unlikely, Jenny was sure that Tavra'd be happy to oblige.

Jenny spent the next two days in a state of acute wariness. By the time they returned to the *Victory*, her nerves were unravelling under the strain.

At dinner that evening, Commander Slair began watching her with puzzlement. When none of his conversational attempts elicited anything but a tightly civil, taciturn response, he finally said, "Are you ill?"

"No, Commander." Jenny glanced at him and then went back to pushing her food around with her fork.

He leaned back, eyeing her speculatively. "In that case, you may continue that explanation of conventions. Tell me, why did you--"

"Because I'm stupid, Commander," Jenny said bitterly.

The remainder of the evening passed in a silence reminiscent of her first days on the ship. Jenny spent the time sitting on the couch, arms around her knees, staring at the intricate embroidered wall-hanging. As soon as she felt it was even moderately believable, she went to bed. She was going to be asleep by the time Slair came in. It'd be a lot easier.

She had just hidden her face in the pillow when she heard him enter the bedroom. She didn't move, listening as he undressed and slid in beside her. She waited for the light to go out.

"You're not asleep. I want to talk to you." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Turn around."

Jenny reluctantly pushed herself away from the security of her pillow. She twisted onto her side and rested on her elbow. "Yes, Commander?"

"What is the matter with you?" he demanded. "You have said nothing for the past three days but, 'Yes, Commander', 'No, Commander', and 'Whatever you say, Commander'. You did not even provide your usual verbiage when questioned about that STAR TREK of yours. Why?"

Jenny stared at him blankly. This she'd never considered--she'd rather assumed he'd heave a sigh of relief at her silence.

"Well?"

Jenny had a terrible urge to just blurt out that she knew he was planning to kill her anyway, and for God's sake get it over with. She couldn't live like this for the next four months, always wondering *when and how?* She really *would* crack up. She continued to stare at him. What could she say? *I finally fell out of bed and woke up?*



His mouth tightened. He grabbed her arm and pulled her up to sit facing him. "I do not know why you have suddenly decided to imitate an ice-statue. However, I do not find it amusing." His voice was hard. "I want you to act in your accustomed fashion. I do not consider this behavior an asset."

*After all that time when he wanted me to shut up, now he's telling me to talk.* A quavering grin touched Jenny's mouth. She tried to relax her hands and shoulders.

Commander Slair released her arm, raising his hand. Jenny jerked back before she realized he'd been reaching for the light control. He looked at her in amazement, eyebrow raised.

"Oh, shit." Jenny bent her head, covering her face with her hands.

He slowly ran his hand along her arm and pulled her hands away from her face. His fingers closed over her hand. "Jenny, what is wrong?"



The painful tension ran down and out of her body, leaving her weak and shaken, but relieved and reassured. She didn't know why. She only knew that now she was all right, *safe*.

"Jenny?" he said again.

Her name. *That* was the key. Since she'd been taken from home, she'd been nameless. 'You'. 'Lady'. Commander Slair had never called her anything at all if he could avoid it.

"I thought everyone had forgotten I'm Jenny," she said unsteadily.

"You told me your name."

Two months ago. "And Vulcans never forget, I suppose?"

"Rarely. If you are for some unfathomable reason back to normal, see that you stay that way. And I should appreciate an explanation."

"An explanation." Jenny wanted only to forget the past three days. As for explaining--

His fingers tightened on hers. "Well?"

Tension gone, she was too damn tired to do any thinking, and said the first thing that flashed through her mind. "I guess I forgot about STAR TREK," she said groggily. "Roddenberry got me into this, and he can just get me out of it."

"Do *none* of your remarks make any sense?" This time Slair sounded at least half-amused, and he released her hand.

Jenny took advantage of this to slide back down to the pillow and close her eyes. "Probably not."

There was a moment's silence. Then he said, "I still want an explanation. I will expect one tomorrow."

"Yes, Slair," Jenny said, more than half asleep. She'd think of something.

Exhausted by relief, Jenny slept late into the following morning. Commander Slair had been gone for some time when she finally pried open her eyes. This gave her the afternoon to rack her brain for a reasonable-sounding explanation that Slair would swallow.

She immediately and regretfully discarded the theory that he'd forget to ask. *I SHOULD have said I was sick, damn it. I could have told him I was getting my period or something like that. Why don't I ever think fast enough?*

That might have gotten a bit awkward as a lie, however. She'd always

had a damned irregular cycle at the best of times, and space travel seemed to have loused it up right royally. Shuttling up and down, to spring on one world, to deep winter on the next, made for confused seasons and a confused body. Not that she minded skipping a few months, all things considered.

As an absolute last resort, she could fall back on the truth. She would infinitely rather not. *'Well, Commander, I suddenly realized you'd been planning to kill me, and it rather upset me. I'm sure you understand.'* Oh, that would sound really great, all right, and there was no way to predict Slair's reaction to it. If he had either forgotten about it and/or changed his mind, the last thing she wanted to do was remind him. *Well, then, what--*

That evening, Commander Slair waited only until he'd changed out of his uniform before bringing up the topic. He sat beside her on the couch. "Well?"

Jenny eyed him with trepidation. Cornered, damn it.

"I would like an explanation for your peculiar behavior of the last few days." His voice was neutral. "And stop looking at me like that. I'm not going to hit you."

This only reminded Jenny that he might. "Well . . ." Her voice trailed off. The explanation she'd rehearsed no longer seemed quite adequate.

His voice hardened. "If it was the result of my refusal to permit you to tour--"

"What? Oh. No." That's right, he'd accused her of sulking because he wouldn't let her explore that stupid planet. "No. I--I was homesick, that's all."

"Homesick." He looked at her. "Why, after all this time, should you suddenly be so stricken?"

"I guess I didn't really believe--think--about it before. But back on that last planet, I had a lot of time to stare out the window and--it just sort of hit me." Jenny abruptly stood. She began twisting the end of her belt around her hand. "I'm so far away from home, I don't even know where it is. I'll never see my family, or friends, or fanzine collection, or artwork, or books, or my two cats again. I'm too old to believe in miracles."

"It has not appeared to distress you unduly until now."

"Oh, of course not." Jenny's voice was deadly calm. "I just love the thought that my parents will never know what happened to me. That my cats will think I've deserted them." She crossed her arms tightly, fingers digging into her flesh. "That my whole existence depends on what *you* like. That I have no skills worth a damn anymore."

Her voice rose with each sentence. She began pacing back and forth in front of the couch. "I can't do *anything*! I can't even walk into a store and buy a book! Or--"

"Why not?" Commander Slair said. "Stand still."

She stopped, spinning around to face him. "Because I haven't got any money, that's why! I haven't--"

He stared at her. "I have. Why didn't you ask Tavra for whatever it was you wanted?"

"Because all *she* can say is, 'It's unsuitable. The commander wouldn't like it.' How am I supposed to know if she's right or not?" A fresh wave of furious resentment drowned a warning to shut up, right now. "I haven't got anything of my own anymore. I can't get a job, I can't earn any money. Everything I knew, everything I spent years studying, is worth *nothing*!"

Commander Slair was looking at her in real surprise.

"Oh, I know you and that damn cousin of yours both think I'm a brain-burn case! Well, Commander, I spent four years taking care of myself. I had a good job, and my own apartment, and I did what I damn well pleased." She was breathing hard, her cheeks hot. She looked down, yanking at her tunic. "And I bought my own clothes, too! Clothes I liked!"

As if it were the ultimate grievance, she snapped, "Don't you like *any* color but blue?" Then, to her horror, she burst into tears.

"Sit down." Slair pulled her back to sit beside him again. "And stop that."

Jenny wiped her hands over her eyes and sniffed hard. "Sorry," she said in a muffled voice.

"As I recall," he said, "I chose you from the available females because you seemed calm, and not given to rampaging emotionalism."

Jenny pressed her hands over her eyes. "Right," she muttered. "Isn't shock wonderful?"

"I fail to understand why Tavra's choice of clothing so distresses you. It appears perfectly suitable."

"The way that woman talks, you'd think you couldn't *see* any other color. Does everything I wear have to be blue?"

"I don't care what color you wear, as long as it is not un--"

"Then will you please tell that to your cousin?"

"Don't you like blue?" Commander Slair inquired.

"Not overwell," said Jenny with another watery sniff. "Nor to the exclusion of all other colors."

"What color do--" He stopped in mid-sentence. "I fail to comprehend why we are spending such an inordinate amount of time on this topic. Go wash your face. Then we will continue this conversation. On a more rational level."

Jenny thankfully disappeared into the bathroom. She spent a considerable time splashing cold water on her face. Then, her clothes being unaccountably soggy, she changed to another light robe, brushed her hair, and returned to the main room.

"Come and sit down," Slair said as she hesitated by the desk. After she seated herself on the far edge of the couch, he surveyed her carefully. "Are you quite recovered?"

"I think so," said Jenny with weary resignation. Two months. She'd managed to cope for two months, and she'd just totally blown all that effort in two minutes.

"Very well. At our next port-call, you will be provided with an opportunity to select additional clothing. It may be any color that pleases you, provided Tavra considers it suitable."

"Thank you." Even if she didn't need any more clothes. A rush of light-headed recklessness filled her. After that outburst a little while ago, almost nothing she said now could do any more damage. "Did you ever happen to notice that every single thing I have to wear is some shade of blue?"

"I do not intend to expend any further energy on this completely trivial topic," Slair said firmly.

He hadn't. That figured.

"As to the other matter. Should you see some item you desire, you are of course at perfect liberty to purchase it. I am quite capable of providing for my household in the proper fashion." He added quickly, "Anything you plan to acquire must be of a reasonable nature, not inconvenient in these quarters."

"I'm positive Tavra will be delighted to tell me what I can't have," Jenny said, staring at him.

"Providing it will fit inconspicuously in these rooms, and is not forbidden by regulations, you may choose what you like."

A wild hope lit in Jenny. "Really? Then-- Oh, Slair, could I possibly get a cat? They're small, and quiet, and don't get in the way at all," she added mendaciously. A cat, for affection and company--

"If you expect me to believe that statement-- They are always precisely where one plans to place something."

"Like your feet," Jenny said. "Would it be all right?"

"Pets are officially banned from military vessels."

"Oh. But I saw one when--the first day I was here. I know I saw it."

"There are no pets permitted," he repeated.

"Oh." The emphasis on the word 'pets' was unmistakable. That cat she'd seen was a working animal, although it was hard to imagine mice on a starship. As far as Jenny could see, the only parasites on board were the 'officers' ladies'. *'They toil not, neither do they spin, but they seem to cost a great deal.'* But I can't have a cat.

She swallowed her disappointment. "I should have known."

"Yes, you should," Slair said, not unkindly. "Were it permitted, I would have one of my own cats here."

"You have cats?" Disappointment was jolted aside by surprise. She'd never thought of Commander Slair doing anything so normal as owning a cat. In fact, she'd hardly thought at all about what he did, merely assuming that Slair spent his time helping the Empire terrorize the galaxy. Jenny stared at the Vulcan. She suddenly seemed, in some indefinable, disconcerting fashion, more real.

"Several." The corner of his mouth turned up. "There is a great deal of room, and they seem to multiply to fill the available space, even though neutered. An interesting ability."

"Hey," said Jenny, struck by a thought, "how come you have cats, and not a sehlat?"

"A what?" said Slair.

"A sehlat?" Jenny said. "You've never heard of them?"

"No. What are they?"

"Oh." Sehlats must be the product only of D.C. Fontana's fertile brain. Too bad. "They were an animal--a Vulcan animal--on STAR TREK. They were supposed to be large, and shaggy, and have long fangs. Vulcans used them for children's pets and guardians."

Slair regarded her dubiously. "I see. That perhaps accounts for these trekkies' assumption that there are few Vulcan children."

"You know, you may be right at that," said Jenny with approval. "In fact, I often wondered, what with that and the *Kahs*--" Now wait a minute, what the *hell* were they talking about, anyway?

There was a momentary silence as they stared at each other. Then, evidently deciding to ignore most of the last portion of the conversation, Slair said, "No pets."

With that, he rose to his feet and went to his desk. He sat down and picked up a computer cassette.

This left Jenny feeling as if the discussion, whatever it had been, had been cut off half finished. "You and that goddamned desk," she said in English.

Slair did not look up. After a moment, Jenny shrugged. The strain of being that obliging to her for more than five minutes at a stretch had probably tired him out. She'd be willing to bet real money he wouldn't talk to her again for the rest of the evening.

"Real true intellectual companionship," she said, still in English. She grinned and headed for the bedroom. She was pretty damn washed out from emotion herself, and didn't much care whether she stayed awake for dinner or not.

"Jenny," said Slair.

She paused at the bedroom door. "Yes?"

His head was still bent over the viewer. "Speak Standard."

*Can't I EVER get the last word around here? Just ONCE?* Jenny continued on into the bedroom and flung herself on the bed. "Not when he's making all the rules, you can't."

About a week later, Jenny was sitting cross-legged on the couch, bent over a book. For once, she was not alone, Tavra being seated at Slair's desk working on a shipping report.

"Do you know what *I* think?" said Jenny in a tone of deepest foreboding as she glared at the novel she'd borrowed from one of the other officer's ladies. "*I* think that you are the Imperial equivalent of Barbara Cartland." *That* was why it was simple-minded enough for her to plow through. It was also just about what she should have expected of a book Marudy Tam thought was marvelous. "How humiliating."

"What?" said Tavra.

Jenny flipped to the last page to verify her theory. "I was right," she said with gloomy satisfaction. "Listen to this. 'Her glowing eyes--burned?--into his. 'You're mine,' he said. 'Yes, darling, yes,' she agreed. 'Now that we've killed Brosel--'"

"Her husband, you understand," Jenny put in. "'Nothing will stand in the way of our love.' Their lips met in--'"

"I am not interested in listening to this--"

"Tripe?" Jenny suggested. "But it's so dreadful. I think it *is* written by Barbara Cartland. Wonderful agent that woman's got."

"Please be quiet," Tavra said.

Jenny's eyebrows shot up at that. *'Please'? What happened to 'shut up'? Boy, she must be in a good mood.* Maybe Tavra was looking forward to going stationside, although this didn't sound all that likely.

Jenny, however, *was* looking forward to it. Slair had remembered his promise regarding her clothes. And although she didn't think she really needed any more, and had never paid more than superficial attention to them at home, here clothing somehow assumed an importance out of all proportion.

"Red," said Jenny longingly in English. "Something that will clash with every goddamn thing in these rooms." She looked over at Tavra. "I wonder what my chances are of getting some jeans and a 'STAR TREK Lives' t-shirt?"

She'd forgotten Tavra would recognize the words 'STAR TREK'. The Vulcan looked up from her report. "Tenaya will be here shortly. Speak Standard. Do not speak of 'STAR TREK' at all."

"Sorry," Jenny muttered, and went back to her book.

Tenaya showed up only a few minutes later. Jenny glanced up when she entered, but didn't speak. Tenaya had been so unresponsive to Jenny's timid efforts that she'd given up trying to be friendly with the young Vulcan woman.

After a quick look at Jenny, Tenaya's attention was for Tavra. "Yes, Tavra?"

"Tenaya, I have an assignment for you," said Tavra. "Sit down."

Tenaya pulled a chair up to the desk and sat facing Tavra. "Yes?"

Tavra inclined her head in Jenny's direction. "The commander's lady will be visiting the stores while we're in port. You will escort her."

*Thrillsville*, Jenny thought.

"Very well." Tenaya sounded singularly unenthusiastic.

Tavra then switched the conversation to Vulcan. "Your job is to guide her clothing selection. As she is from one of the outworlds, she lacks familiarity with what is suitable. Please bear in mind that any item she acquires must be acceptable for an officer's lady. You are to prevent her from looking like a joy-house resident instead of a respectable woman. Make sure that her apparel--"

"Is such as the commander would approve?" Tenaya also spoke in Vulcan.

"Such as *I* would approve," said Tavra. "Do not let her indulge her

inclination to purchase any item that happens to have glitterthread in it."

At that point, Jenny hastily shifted position to lie flat on her stomach, facing away from the two Vulcans. She kept her gaze carefully fixed on her book. This was going to be a lot more fun than trying to follow Slair and Tavra's discussions of administrative details and reports.

Daily surreptitious study of Vulcan was beginning to pay off. She couldn't catch every word, but she had no trouble understanding the meaning of most sentences. Somewhat to her surprise, Jenny was able to keep up with Tavra and Tenaya's conversation with relative ease.

*Eavesdropping for fun and profit*, she thought with a grin.

"In addition, Tenaya, I am making you responsible for working with her on manners and public conduct," Tavra said. "She needs to learn the finer points of etiquette. You are the person best qualified to instruct her."

"I appreciate your confidence in me," Tenaya said, with what Jenny felt was a lamentable lack of eagerness. "But surely you--"

"And eliminate the more egregious social errors from her conversation," Tavra went on. "I would very much like to insure that she does not do something extremely awkward in public."

"Such as calling the Lady Sarek 'Lady Amanna'?"

"Yes," said Tavra shortly. "So you heard?"

"Did you think I wouldn't?" Tenaya asked. "I should think everybody heard about it."

*WHAT a grapevine.* Jenny turned a page to prove she wasn't paying them the least attention.

"It's rather strange," Tenaya added. "She doesn't look like such a--"

"Such a what?" Tavra demanded, as Tenaya stopped.

Jenny turned another page and glanced over at Tavra and Tenaya. This should be interesting.

"Such a hot-headed, vicious troublemaker," Tenaya said.

*WHAT?* Jenny stared across at Tenaya. *ME?*

Tavra's dark eyes were fastened on Tenaya's face. "Explain."

"Really, Tavra--we all saw her hair, and her face. The general opinion on the ship--"





"Yes?" said Tavra grimly.

"Most people seem to favor the theory that she had a fight with the commander and he struck her. She is supposed to have declared that, if he wasn't prepared to provide for her with adequate generosity, and didn't keep her any better than a working officer, she'd look like one as well. She then locked herself in the bathroom and did a really bad job of cutting her hair."

*Ouch. Jenny tried desperately to keep a stright face. What a story. And here I thought I did a pretty good job of that haircut, too.*

"I see," said Tavra tightly. "The ability of people to construct an elaborate explanation from no facts never ceases to amaze me."

"She did cut her hair," Tenaya pointed out. "And she--"

"Go on," said Tavra, as Tenaya stopped talking. "And what else?"

Tenaya hesitated. "Well--anyone with eyes can see he won't let her carry a weapon. He won't even let her out without a guard--and no matter what anyone may say, Tavra, I cannot believe it's as an overly ostentatious display. His sense of humor isn't *that* odd. Unless he thought it would irritate the captain--but it wouldn't. And--"

Tenaya looked over at Jenny, who smiled sweetly back and turned to her unread book, trying to keep a sidelong glance on the two Vulcans.

"And?" Tavra said. Tenaya remained silent, a thoughtful expression on her lovely face. Tavra tapped her fingers on the desk. "Tenaya."

"And if I am to work with her, I do not want to spend my time defending myself from her temper and her sadistic ideas of whimsical amusement," Tenaya said. "If she has so little control over her temper that she persists in fighting with Commander Slair--" Tenaya gazed steadily at Tavra. "I'm sure you see my point."

*Fighting with--* Jenny ducked her face into the pages of her book. That was the funniest idea she'd heard in ages. What on earth had given Tenaya *that* idea? *Oh, of course. I've got such a rotten temper I keep getting into fights, and Slair won't let me wear a knife so I won't stab anybody important and cause all sorts of trouble. Oh, good grief, of all the ridiculous--* Jenny choked and bit her lip hard.

"As to that, Tenaya," Tavra said, "permit me to point out that you are one of Slair's top operatives. She's nothing but his lady."

"I see." Tenaya's face relaxed.

"Exactly," said Tavra.

Jenny closed her book with a snap and said in English, "You, Tavra, are a grade-A, number-one, rotten--"

"Tenaya, you will encourage her to refrain from comment in unintelligible languages," Tavra said in Standard, with a cold glance at Jenny. "It makes many people nervous."

Tenaya nodded, then turned to Jenny. "I am to take you shopping, lady. When do you wish to go?" She still didn't sound overjoyed at the prospect.

"Any time you like," Jenny said in a subdued voice. "Tavra, are you coming too?"

"No. I am sure Tenaya will prove adequate. Her taste is excellent. I strongly suggest you follow her recommendations."

Jenny pounced on the word 'suggest'. Tavra's statement had been just that--a suggestion, or she simply would have told Jenny to do whatever

Tenaya said. Jenny gave Tenaya a tentative smile. "Yes. I'd appreciate your advice, Tenaya."

Tenaya regarded her skeptically. Jenny looked at Tavra, who was eyeing her disapprovingly--as usual.

"Oh, by the way, Tavra, I asked Slair about something." Jenny felt like being very mean, but she tried to sound neutral rather than triumphant. There was no point in being stupid about it. "He said it isn't necessary for every single piece of clothing I wear to be blue. He told you, didn't he?"

"Yes. He did." Tavra turned to Tenaya. "However, Tenaya, if she comes back with anything that's bright pink, with sequins, I recommend that you don't." This was plainly a warning to both Jenny and Tenaya.

Tenaya glanced at Jenny. "She won't," Tenaya said flatly.

"I must say, I infinitely prefer shopping with Tenaya," Jenny told Slair later. "Tavra can only say two things: 'It's unsuitable', and 'The commander wouldn't like it'." Jenny ran a hand appreciatively over the silken fabric of her dress. The color was warming, the exact shade of expensive apricot jam.

"No doubt," said Slair without looking up from his desk.

"By the way," said Jenny hesitantly, "I got two new evening dresses. Tenaya seemed to think--"

"Blue?" Slair asked, glancing at her and lifting one eyebrow slightly.

"No," said Jenny, regarding this as deliberate provocation. "Red wine and dark honey. That one's slit up to here on the side, and the back's-- Tenaya says it's conservative," she said in dubious question.

"You can trust Tenaya's taste."

"Oh. Anyway, she even let me look around after we went shopping. There was one store there that made Macy's look sick. You should have seen--"

"I have," Slair said.

"There was a chair," Jenny said determinedly. She didn't think Tenaya had appreciated it properly, and she wanted to tell *somebody* about it. "I've never seen such an appalling piece of furniture in my life. I think the little mirrors on the crosspieces were the finishing touch. It had a kind of metal grillwork hood, with gold fringe, and--"

"I refuse to have a piece of furniture like that in my quarters," said Commander Slair.

"You're as bad as Tenaya. She really thought I planned to drag that monstrosity back with me."

"If you used that tone of voice when speaking of it to her, I'm not surprised." He looked over to Jenny, who was curled up on the couch. "You sound as if you liked it."

"Nobody in their right mind would like that chair. It was really awful. I particularly admired the red furry blobs scattered all over the back and sides of the hood."

Commander Slair regarded her curiously. "Would you actually have purchased an item like that, or were you merely attempting to annoy Tenaya?"

"Why should I want to annoy Tenaya? She seems like a nice enough person." Jenny's mouth curved in a grin. "However, the thought of what Tavra would have said did have a certain charm. Maybe I should have asked if they had it in blue."

"The only way I would like a chair like that is invisible."

Jenny's eyebrows flew upward and she stared over at Commander Slair. He had returned his attention to one of what she was beginning to consider an endless stream of reports and journals. "I thought Vulcans never told jokes."

"Really?" he said. "Oh, yes, STAR TREK. Of course."

Jenny leaned back and hooked her hands around her knees. "I sure got the impression Tavra wouldn't know a joke if it bit her on the nose."

"Tavra never did have any sense of humor," Slair said mildly.

"Oh," said Jenny. "Well--well anyway, thank you for the clothes. You have no idea how sick I am of blue." Although Tavra might have had a point; this apricot dress stood out vividly in a room of greens and blues.

"You needed more clothing in any case," he said.

*Now that you're not going to kill me, Commander?* Jenny pushed that thought to the back of her mind and said, **TENAYA**



"Just be sure your next officer's lady is my size, and you'll be all set."

Commander Slair set down the report and pushed his chair back, eyeing her with an odd expression. "'All set' for a knife between my ribs. Do you seriously think--"

"Seemed logical to me," Jenny said. "I mean, really, Slair--"

"This obsession of yours with the word 'logical'--" He stopped, tapped his hand lightly on the desk. "Those clothes are part of your salary. As is--" Suspicion seemed to cross his face. "Did you get any new jewelry?"

"What for? There's already all that--" 'Junk' did not, somehow, seem like a politic description.

"I will not have a person in my employ appear in public in a red dress and what I feel sure you would describe as 'blue jewelry'. Make sure Tenaya takes you shopping again before we leave this base." He tapped his hand on the desk again, studying her.

"Sorry," said Jenny, who didn't like the turn this conversation had taken. "I didn't think of it."

"Tell me, Jenny, what did you spend your money on?" He sounded really curious.

"At home? Oh, books, mostly. Fanzines. Artwork." Jenny thought back longingly.

"Indeed. But not jewelry?"

"Really, Slair, what would someone like me do with a diamond necklace? If I had that much money, I'd get a videotaper and an IBM correcting Selectric. I mean, I would have." Her voice took on a note of depression.

"You'd have gotten what?"

By the time she'd explained, Slair was regarding her with an even odder expression. "Besides," she added, "I can't tell whether gemstones are real or not, except for--"

"I see," said Slair. There was the note of finality in his voice that usually signaled the end of a conversation. After studying her for a moment, he turned back to the work on his desk.

Jenny looked at his bent head. That air of concentration probably indicated a silent evening. It was a good thing she'd gotten those new books today.

However, it turned out to be one of those evenings when Commander

Slair wanted to hear about STAR TREK. Later, Jenny obligingly sat on the foot of the bed, trying to decide what to regale him with tonight.

"Well?" said Slair.

Jenny leaned back on her hands. Commander Slair had long ago abandoned the pretense of any real interest in Earth. They'd covered everything he'd wanted to know about defenses and so on very quickly. What he really wanted to hear about was the peculiar world of STAR TREK fandom. Ever since she'd realized this, she'd been rationing episodes, stories, and conventions. The longer she could spin out STAR TREK tales for his amusement, the better off she'd be.

*Scheherazade*, flashed through her mind. It was a peculiarly apt image. Jenny glanced down at the sheer robe she wore, and then over at Slair, who was wearing his blue robe and had propped himself casually against the pillows.

"Definitely Scheherazade," she said, grinning. "I'm thinking," she added quickly, as he raised an eyebrow.

*Now, what?* Jenny's smile widened. There were one or two little things she'd been carefully skirting. . . .

"I don't know what you're thinking of doing," said Slair. "But stop it and--"

"I must be crazy," said Jenny recklessly. "Tonight's story, children, is 'Mirror, Mirror'."

"What?" said Slair.

Jenny shifted to sit cross-legged on the bed facing him. "Slair, do you remember me saying you people were only in one episode? Well--"

*Oh, I've really got him with this one*, Jenny thought gleefully some time later. She'd been doing as close to a line-by-line replay of the episode as she could, on the theory that the worst Slair was liable to do if he didn't like it was knock her off the bed. "And then--"

"Wait," Slair said. "Do you mean to tell me that Spock wishes to spare the captain? Why?"

"Oh, Spock doesn't seek command because--"

This was apparently too much for Slair. "He wanted ship command so badly he could taste it," he said curtly.

"Really?" said Jenny. So the real Spock had wanted the *Enterprise*, had he? "I couldn't find a Captain Spock. . . ." She let the half-question trail off. Slair hardly ever answered her questions anyway.

"No." There was a very slight smile on Commander Slair's face.

"Even his mother's family couldn't get that for him. And the Lady Sarek's influence is considerable. Port Admiral at his age," he added, sounding annoyed.

"Child prodigy?" Jenny suggested helpfully.

"To a certain extent."

Since Slair was in an unwontedly expansive mood, Jenny asked, "But Slair, isn't admiral a higher rank than captain? They wouldn't let Spock be captain, but they made him admiral? That's odd."

"Port Admiral," Slair said. "And that, as you should have learned, is a groundside rank."

"Oh," said Jenny meekly.

"The Empire will never give a Vulcan ship command," he said flatly. "Now finish the story. Roddenberry outdid himself with this one. I suppose he wrote it himself."

"No, as a matter of fact, he didn't. I have--had--a copy of the original outline. The only similarity to the aired version was the alternate universe concept." Jenny leaned forward. "Hey, Slair, do you think he saw that and influenced the writer somehow?"

"I think it just barely possible," he said dryly. "Go on."

Encouraged by this, Jenny promptly continued. Slair interrupted her at one or two other points, evidently unable to refrain from what an uncharitable person would have considered snide comments.

"--and there was Marlana again. The end."

There was a pause. Commander Slair lifted one eyebrow. "Amazing. That man's mind is truly ingenious."

"'Mirror, Mirror'," said Jenny pompously, "is one of *the* most popular episodes. Everybody seems to love 'Mirror' stories."

"Indeed? Why?"

Jenny looked at Commander Slair, down at herself, and suddenly lost her exuberance. "We thought it was exciting," she said in a flat tone.

There was no response from Commander Slair. Jenny began tracing the swirls of color on her almost transparent robe. Brown to gold to fire-orange-- *All the colors of autumn. Exciting. Oh, boy. Of all episodes, I had to fall into "Mirror". Oh, I want to go home. . . .*

"What's the matter?" said Slair.

"Nothing," said Jenny, her eyes studiously on the color-swirls. *All the colors of autumn. Home . . .* "I was just wondering whether it's autumn yet. At home, I mean."

"Figure it out," he said.

"I can't," said Jenny. "No time-references on that damn slaver." That unshaped stretch of time had lost her all connection with Earth. She stared broodingly at the bedspread. "I started out in the best fictional fashion by gouging my arm with my nails to keep track. After two days, I said, 'Why am I *doing* this?', and stopped. So I lost track."

"Surely you must have some idea." Slair sounded slightly more interested. "Don't most female humans have a cycle that--"

"I think space travel loused it up. Mine was never reliable anyway." To Jenny's relief, he dropped the subject. She quickly steered the conversation away from embarrassingly intimate topics and back to STAR TREK.

"'Mirror' is a pretty damn funny episode, knowing what I do now. The officer's lady doubling as a working officer--think Aldith would like that?" she offered hopefully, glancing at Slair.

The corner of his mouth turned up. Then he twisted to dim the lights.

Jenny stretched. "Good thing you've got a bed this size," she said, her mind still on "Mirror, Mirror". Kirk's quarters sure hadn't had a bed large enough for two. She grinned. "It would be just like the military to insist top officers have a woman kicking around and then only issue you single beds."

He half-turned toward her, one eyebrow raised. Then he leaned forward, curving his hand behind her head to pull her mouth to his.

*You HAD to open your big mouth, didn't you?* Jenny thought with resignation as Slair unhooked the single fastening of her robe and let his weight carry them both down onto the mattress. *Oh, well. . . .*

The next few months flowed by smoothly enough. Under Slair and Tavra's strict and constant surveillance, there was little chance for really bad foul-ups on Jenny's part. Jenny flattered herself that she was becoming fairly well accustomed to her new life.

It would have been even better if she hadn't kept getting hit with surprises of varying degrees of charm every time she thought she had things more or less under control. She could have done without the discovery that Commander Slair usually returned from exploratory missions in a very good mood. Too damn good--almost bouncy. Being casually picked up and tossed several feet to the bed hadn't done Jenny's nerves any good. Aside from scaring the hell out of her, it had been an unsettling reminder of just how strong Slair was.

But all things considered, life was stable enough for Jenny's mind and body to adjust--again, more or less. She still found the days overfull of lonely hours, but that gave her plenty of time to study. After all, what else was she going to do all day? Write STAR TREK stories?



At least Tenaya was friendly now, which provided some companionship. And there were always the evening STAR TREK reruns for Slair.

"No, you don't understand. Wait a minute, maybe I'd better tell you about *Silk Stockings* first." God, was this getting tangled. Maybe telling Slair about the Kraith satire based on *Ninotchka* that she'd written hadn't been such a hot idea after all.

"Well, anyway, I decided that the Vulcans--this is Kraith, remember--send a *tokiel* dancer to Earth on a cultural exchange program, and--"

At that point, Jenny shifted and caught sight of herself in the bedroom mirror. She stared at the reflection for a minute. She tried for control, failed, and began to laugh.

"This is ridiculous. I don't believe I'm sitting here, half-naked, on a starship, and--and trying to explain Vulcan customs to a--a--" She started laughing too hard to talk, and fell forward to muffle her face in the bedcovers.

"Stop that," said Slair. "Finish the story--coherently."

Jenny sat up again, still giggling. Laughter stopped as she looked at Slair, although he didn't seem irritated. *Right. You're Scheherazade, Jen, and you'd better not forget it.*

But so long as she remembered that, and didn't try to think too far into the future, she was all right. This she could handle. The last thing she wanted or needed now was any more excitement or adventure. By the grace of God, she was still alive after six months, and she didn't want any more surprises.

# Part Three

## Housequest

"'Vulcans never tell jokes,'" said Jenny viciously as she fastened the intricate hooks on her tunic. "I'm going to kill you, Gene Roddenberry. Slair and his goddamned warped sense of humor!"

She ran a smoothing hand over the pale-bronze folds of the tunic and stepped into sandals that matched the intricately-scrolled green trim bordering both tunic and pants. She bent and quickly flipped the clasps shut.

Straightening, she glanced around the hotel room. As far as she could tell, everything was ready for departure as soon as Slair returned.

And the next stop was Slair's home.

"Goddamned Vulcan," Jenny said. She had no idea whatsoever of what she should expect next. For all she knew, Slair's home could be anything from a tent to a treehouse.

She hadn't even known they were coming here until a week ago. At that point, Slair had, just in passing, mentioned that the crew was getting long leave while the *Victory* was overhauled and refitted. Oh, yes, she was accompanying him home.

Jenny's questions had been not so much snubbed as ignored. Commander Slair seemed to have an intense aversion to volunteering anything that could be construed, however remotely, as personal information. All she knew was that he lived in the country--sort of--and that he kept cats.

"Fat lot of help *that* is." Jenny grabbed her hairbrush and sat on the edge of the bed. She pulled the mass of her hair forward over her shoulder and began brushing vigorously. Her thoughts were still running along the lines of 'that sneaky bastard'. Not trusting people was all very well, but-- "*Honestly!*"

Not being able to talk freely to people on the ship left her wide open to surprises like this. It was amazing how Tavra's presence discouraged casual conversation. And since Jenny still spent little time anywhere but Slair's quarters, she was dependent on what Slair and Tavra condescended to tell her.

Oh, Slair and Tavra had mentioned this leave, all right--that was what all that talk about 'Vakai' had been about. Jenny'd assumed it was

another stopover. And not only had she only overheard one conversation about it, but it had been in Vulcan. Since Jenny didn't dare repeat anything she heard in Vulcan, she hadn't been able to ask Tenaya for any information either. Not that that would have helped much. Tenaya might be friendly, but Jenny was always conscious that Tenaya worked for Slair, and wasn't a safe confidant.

*Shit. Well, at least Slair doesn't live on Vulcan, thank God.*  
Vakai was the next planet out in the Vulcan system. From what Jenny had seen, Vakai was a lot more habitable than Vulcan had ever sounded.

At the sound of the main door opening, she rose and went to the bedroom door, still pulling the brush through her hair. "Slair?"

She came to a startled halt in the doorway. A tall Vulcan, soberly clad in dark gray, stood in the room. He was a total stranger. Jenny's hand tightened on the brush. "What--"

The stranger's eyebrow lifted in what she'd long ago concluded was the typical Vulcan gesture of surprise. "Who are you?"

"I belong to Commander Slair," Jenny informed him, the phrase that had once bothered her so intensely a reassuring safeguard. "Who are you? And what are you doing in here?"

He stared at her. "You belong to my father?" he said blankly.

"Your *father*?"

"I am Sundaren," the Vulcan said. "Slair's son."

"His *son*?" Her strongest emotion was sheer outrage. It was really very simple, of course. She was going to murder Slair. She added weakly in English, "Good God."

She closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. When she looked again, Sundaren was still standing there. He was still taller than she was, too.

"But--how old are you?" she demanded suddenly, jolted into rudeness.

"Thirty--" he began, then stopped.

"You're older than *I* am?" said Jenny in disbelief.

Sundaren's face was an impassive mask. "But what--"

It was clear that dear old Slair hadn't told his son any more than he'd told her. Sympathy for a fellow confused sufferer warred with sudden embarrassment. "Oh. Well, you see, I'm Commander Slair's, uh, officer's lady.

"Then what are you doing *here*?"

Jenny flushed and lapsed into silence. As they stood staring at each other, Jenny realized she should have known Sundaren was a relative of Slair's. Oh, God, yes, she'd even heard his name mentioned. Now that she was looking for it, she could see the family resemblance. Sundaren had the same black hair and yellowish eyes, although *his* hair had the straight-bang "classic Vulcan haircut" and his eyes had overtones of amber rather than grey.

Their frozen study of each other was broken by Slair's entrance. He strode into the room, halting as both Sundaren and Jenny swung around to fasten their eyes on him.

"Greetings, father."  
Sundaren sounded somewhat less than overjoyed. He nodded at Jenny. "Does she speak Vulcan?"

"No," said Slair.

Sundaren instantly switched to that language. "You might have informed me."

"It didn't seem of any particular importance," Slair replied, also in Vulcan.

Just as she looked at Slair with irritation, Jenny remembered that she wasn't supposed to understand Vulcan. She quickly turned and went to drop her brush on the nearest table.

*I'd like to throw it at that character!* she thought indignantly. *Of all the dumb, sneaky tricks to pull! A full-grown son, for heaven's sake!*

"Oh, my God!" she said in English. She turned back to stare at Slair, horrified. He was *married*? And was cheerfully dragging her home with him anyway? This was going to be much worse than she'd thought.

Her attention returned to the two Vulcans, she discovered she'd missed some of their conversation.

"--already knew that," Sundaren was saying. "Understandable. We all know how--insistent--the Imperial military can be. But why bring her home with you? It seems unnecessary. It is not, after all, as if you--"



## Sundaren

"I find her amusing." Slair's tone clearly indicated he considered the subject closed.

"I have never understood your idea of humor, father."

"Sundaren!" said Slair in a repressive tone.

Jenny choked slightly. For at least the thousandth time since she'd left Earth, she was unsure whether she wanted to laugh or cry. How the hell did she get into these things, anyway?

"What's the matter?" asked Slair, breaking off the conversation with Sundaren and looking to her.

Jenny looked at him and then at Sundaren. If Slair's *son* was at least four years older than she was, Slair certainly wasn't the fortyish she'd been more or less assuming in the absence of any data other than his appearance. Sundaren might not be his oldest, or his only, child, either.

"I--that is, well--" Jenny could not feel this was expressing herself very clearly, and stopped.

"What is it?"

"You didn't tell me you had children older than I am." Damn it, that wasn't what she'd meant to say at all.

Slair lifted one eyebrow. "You didn't ask."

Confusion vanished under a wave of sheer exasperation. "I did not have to come six million light years to play straight man to jokes like that," she said through gritted teeth.

"Vulcans never tell jokes," Slair said blandly.

"Oh, for the love of--" Jenny said in English. "What was it I ever did to deserve this?"

Slair looked at her coldly. "You will refrain from making undoubtedly rude comments."

"I don't see why you assume--" she began defensively.

"It saves time." Slair turned back to Sundaren.

"Uh, Slair?" Jenny had to find out just how bad this was going to get. As Slair glanced at her, she said quickly, "Isn't your wife going to object?"

"Object to what?" Slair sounded slightly puzzled. "In any case, she's been dead for five years."

This did not, somehow, completely explain matters to Jenny's satisfaction. "Oh." She added, "I'm sorry to hear that," was an automatic response.

Slair regarded her with an expression of sardonic disbelief. "Why?"

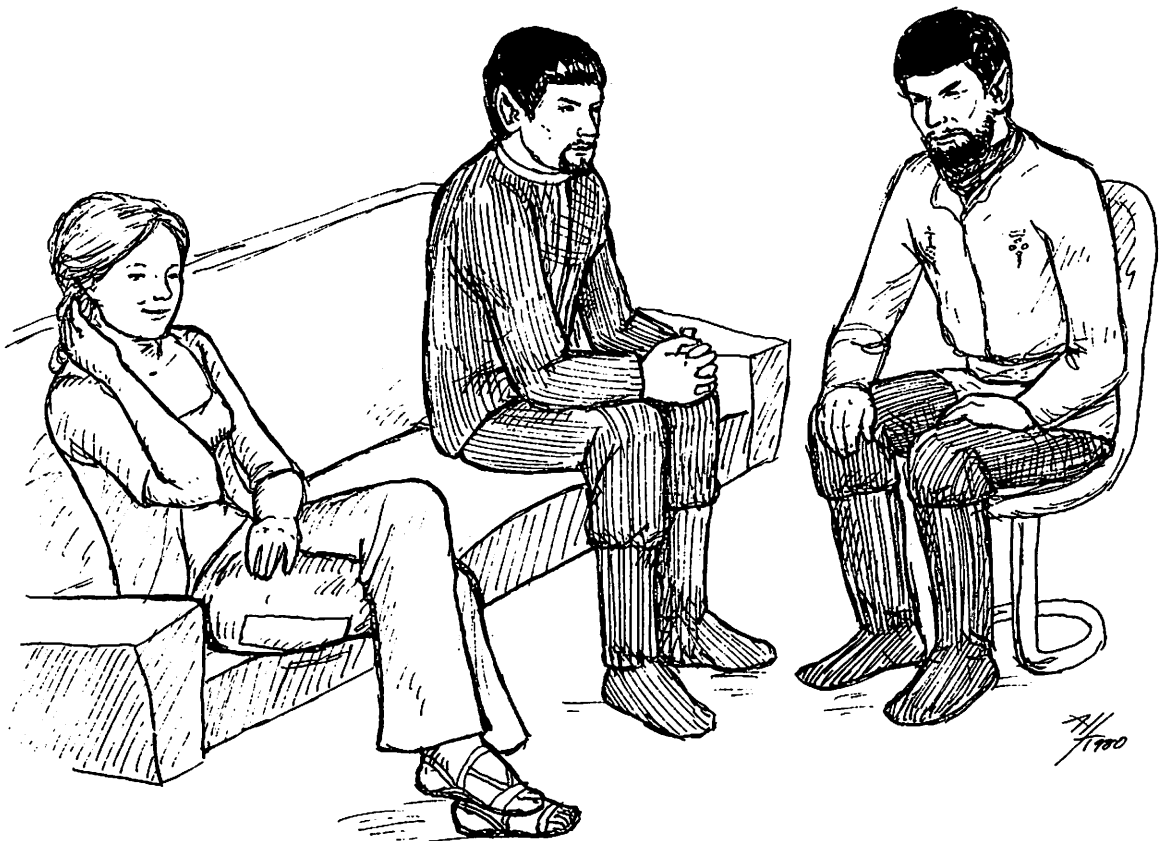
As Jenny stared at him, Slair went to a chair and sat down. He nodded to Sundaren, who also sat, in a less casually relaxed manner, on the couch. After a moment, Jenny, stunned but more than willing to drop the subject of Slair's wife, plopped down at the far end of the couch.

Sundaren looked from his father to Jenny, and then back to his father. His expression, or rather, the careful lack thereof, put Jenny forcibly in mind of a cat trying to stalk with dignity through sopping wet grass--unenthusiastic about the whole proceeding.

Jenny made the mistake of glancing at Slair. His eyes met hers, and he raised his eyebrows very slightly. In spite of a strong feeling that this whole setup was far, far too much, she started to laugh. She turned it into a not-very-convincing cough.

Sundaren eyed her cautiously, continuing to address his father in Vulcan. "Where are you planning to keep her? Had you let me know you intended to bring--"

"If the arrival of one unannounced person will cause major inconvenience, it is plainly high time I came home to check the household management," Slair said.



"Of course it will not occasion--" Sundaren sounded a bit affronted.

Slair casually interrupted him. "I sincerely trust you aren't going to say there isn't enough room. Unless Corroon has turned my apartment into a grain storage bin, there should be adequate space for a harem."

"All I intended to inquire," Sundaren began stiffly, "was where you wished to assign her living quarters. Since you have apparently decided to keep her with you in the family's section, there will naturally be no need to arrange suitable rooms." He looked over at Jenny again. "Father," he said, rather tentatively.

"What's the matter, Sundaren?"

"If this--your lady--"

"Her name is Jenny." Slair looked quietly amused.

Sundaren had so obviously started to say, 'this person you picked up', and thought better of it, that Jenny stifled another incipient giggle. She was eavesdropping on this touching family reunion between Slair and his patently disapproving son with shameless enjoyment. She did, however, feel that Sundaren was overreacting. You'd think Slair had dragged home a cobra.

As Sundaren hesitated, Slair said, "Stop trying to be tactful, Sundaren. What is it?"

"Since she'll be in the family quarters, what about Semoran and Tekitta?" Sundaren said. "It would be exceedingly uncomfortable should she attempt to disrupt the household for her own amusement if she becomes bored, or--"

"She won't." Slair's tone was firm and cold. "Sometimes I think you worry too much, son. Do you really think I would permit that?"

*Semoran and Tekitta? NOW what? Sundaren's kids? Wait a second, who the hell's "Corroon"?* A sudden and depressing vision of spending the next couple of months in a house full of logical, bloodthirsty Empire-Vulcan children flashed through her mind. This was quickly followed by the thought that if Sundaren had children, Slair was a grandfather.

Jenny decided it was high time she asked one or two questions. "Uh, Slair?"

Both Vulcans turned to look at her. She noted that Sundaren appeared more cheerful.

"Yes?" said Slair.

Repressing a strong urge to tell him exactly what she thought of him and his little surprises, Jenny said, "I was just wondering if there's anything else, or anyone else, I should know about. I heard you say something about 'Semoran and Tekitta'." She looked at Sundaren and added, "Your children?"



"My younger brother and sister," Sundaren said.

Jenny looked at Slair. She had an acute sense of ill-use.

"Only three," he told her. He leaned back in his chair. The corner of his mouth curved up.

"You can just stop laughing at me," Jenny said. "You really pulled a neat set-up on this one, didn't you?"

"You have a suspicious mind," Slair commented. "What a pleasant surprise."

Jenny studied him uneasily. He was acting almost too expansive. She followed his gaze as it went to his son. Sundaren's expression was, Jenny suspected, the more restrained Vulcan equivalent of '*Parents!*'

*Why--he's teasing his son!* Jenny thought in surprise. *Of course.* She already knew only too well that these real Vulcans didn't act as logically nuts as the STAR TREK ones. *THAT'S what it is, he's almost home, where he can unwind. Well, unwind as much as these people ever do, I suppose.*

Slair and Sundaren had begun an animated conversation in Vulcan. As it seemed to consist primarily of a hard-to-follow discussion of crop yields, Jenny stopped trying to listen. She got up to collect her abandoned hairbrush.

Reseated on the couch, she began braiding up her hair. *All right, if Sundaren's thirty, then Slair--* Jenny gave herself a severe mental shake. Knowing Vulcans were supposed to have longer lifespans, and a slower aging pattern, was quite different from being slapped in the face with it. *Yeesch. Now, let's see, if-- Damn you, hair, stop sliding!*

She was fully occupied with both uncooperative hair and a rapidly lengthening list of questions she wanted to ask Slair about this little establishment of his, when she realized that Slair and Sundaren had worked their way around to local gossip.

"--beautiful, but stupid," Sundaren was saying. "So her mother, an eminently sensible woman--"

"So I have always thought," Slair said. "It's truly amazing that two such parents could produce a child like Toury."

Her interest caught, Jenny stopped trying to persuade a last strand of hair that it wanted to join its friends and relations. A stupid Vulcan, stupid enough to be a note-worthy conversational topic, must really have all the brains and wit of a mongoloid newt.

"It must be particularly difficult for a family so proud of its intellectual achievements," Slair went on. "I doubt even their money and their family connections could find Toury a decent husband."

"That's why her parents arranged for her career as Commodore Thelfel's lady. It was the only thing they could think of, I suppose."

*When I think of how goddamned snide Tavra was about Vulcan women NOT being--oh, dear. WHAT a lovely--* Jenny quickly wiped the grin from her face as Slair stared hard at her. She looked at him with inquiring surprise.

He continued to stare at her as he said, "Thelfel doubtless thinks he managed a brilliant maneuver in persuading her family to permit Toury to waste her time as an officer's lady. Well, the two should be admirably suited."

*Thus confirming the theory that all commodores had their brains removed upon promotion,* Jenny thought with delight. *I wonder if Commodore Thelfel can walk and chew gum?*

"Sometimes, father, I don't think you have a proper respect for the Imperial military," Sundaren said. "Anyway, while they were so involved in negotiations with Thelfel, I was able to convince them to lease us those northern woodlands at very reasonable terms, their main attention being elsewhere." He looked modestly pleased with himself.

"Good work." Slair switched to Standard and addressed Jenny. "If you are quite finished playing with your hair--"

With a quick, doubtful glance at him, she said, "Completely."

Slair rose to his feet. Sundaren also stood. "Sundaren, we can continue our discussion on the way. We may as well get started. Jenny, what is so amusing?"

"What?" Jenny had merely been considering Commodore Thelfel and the beauteous Toury. If she could only tell her friends *that* one-- Her grin faded with the familiar stab of pain the thought of Isabel and Grace always caused. "Oh, nothing, I--" She paused, then found herself saying, "Slair, how old *are* you?"

"Eighty-four," he said.

As Jenny stared at him, trying frantically to make some conversion of this into Earth years, he wrapped his hand around her wrist and pulled her to her feet.

The following morning Jenny drifted awake to the hot light of sun on her face. Faint sounds of bustle reached her ears. Without opening her eyes, she arched and stretched, rolled to bury her face in the softness of pillow, and automatically groped for her alarm clock.

Her fingers encountered only empty air. Frowning, she propped herself on one elbow, blinking sticky eyelids, and shoved tangled hair out of her face.

"If you wish to eat, I suggest you arise," Slair said.

His voice banished her disorientation. She sat up, yawning.

"Look, she's awake." The voice was interested and the words were in Vulcan.

Jenny snatched up the sheet, nearly strangling on her yawn. The weight near her feet which, while still half-asleep, she had assumed to be her entwined and somnolent cats, turned out to be a small boy.

He wore a broad-belted short kilt, sandals, and what Jenny devoutly hoped was a *toy* gun at his belt. His golden-amber eyes were wide with curiosity under slanted black brows. After a second, Jenny identified him as Slair's younger son.

"She's awake now," he repeated.

"So it would seem." Slair, nearly dressed, picked up his belt and knife. "But I place no reliance upon her semblance of consciousness."

Jenny was now awake and alert enough to restrain any reaction beyond the beginning of a sidelong look. Of course Slair would converse with his own family, in his own home, in his own language. Her months of intense and private study had enabled her to understand Vulcan almost too easily--she'd have to watch her reactions carefully.

The boy addressed himself to Jenny in polite but eager Vulcan. "Greetings. Are you staying for a long time? Why don't you get up?" He looked over to Slair and added, "Why did you bring this one home, father?"

"A universal question, it seems," Jenny said in English. She ducked her head to hide bubbling laughter. There was nothing quite like a small child, even if that small child happened to be Vulcan, for posing awkward questions.

"You will have an opportunity to practice your Standard," Slair told him, ignoring the last question. "She does not speak our language."

"Oh." There was a pause as the child digested this. His next remark to Jenny was in careful Imperial Standard. "Do you ride?"

"I can ride a horse." Before he could follow this attractive tangent, Jenny said, "You're--Semoran?" She wrapped the sheet more securely under her arms and clasped her hands around her knees.

"I'm Semoran. I," his voice was proud, "am almost seven."

"Six and one day?" Jenny smiled at him. Semoran seemed a nice enough kid, not the logically vicious little monster she'd been fearing. In fact, even the brief taste she'd had of life here indicated an atmosphere far less permeated with violence and tension than life on the *Victory*.

She still hadn't recovered from the shock she'd received the night before when Slair's wildly excited younger children had flung themselves at him with delighted cries of, "Father!", and been gathered in a fond embrace by their parent. There had been a more subdued but equally affectionate greeting from Corroon, who was Sundaren's wife. It had all made Jenny, watching from the sidelines, feel oddly left out.

"Six years and seven months and five days," Semoran informed her with dignity.

"I can plainly see you're on the brink of old age." Jenny kept her face perfectly straight. As a matter of fact, Semoran seemed quite a bit younger than six-and-a-half--more like four, say. Which made sense, now that she thought of it, since the Vulcans lived longer than humans. . . .

"How old are you?"

"How would you like to be a dear, sweet child and go away?" Jenny said. If there was one thing she didn't intend to broadcast, it was the fact that she was younger than that stuffed-shirt brother of his. She added amiably, "Before you shatter ten years' worth of cherished preconceived cultural stereotypes."

Semoran's eyebrows shot up toward his thick bang of black hair. He looked uncertainly at his father, who was watching them with what looked like guarded amusement. Then he turned his attention back to Jenny. "Don't you like children?"

"Only if they're properly cooked," Jenny assured him. "It's just that I have to get up, and--"

Semoran visibly withdrew at her casual, smiling comment. His whole attitude radiated deep suspicion.

Jenny hoped she hadn't given the child the fixed idea she was a cannibal. "Oh, for the love of-- Semoran, it was just a joke. It's a common line where I come from." She added, in an almost pleading tone, "W.C. Fields?"

"It's all right, Semoran." Slair came over to place a reassuring hand on his son's shoulder. "It is merely her customary mode of conversation."

Semoran stared at Jenny with fascination. "Do you always talk like that?"

"You may ascertain that for yourself," Slair told him. "Later."

Semoran climbed off the bed, keeping his wide eyes on Jenny.

"Go along and prepare yourself for breakfast," said Slair. "She won't vanish."



Semoran cast a last look at Jenny. "They really do have funny ears and eyes," he stated calmly in Vulcan to his father, and obediently ran out of the room.

Jenny bit down so hard on her lip that she tasted blood. After a brief but strenuous struggle with her emotions, she managed to comment placidly enough, or so she hoped, "My novelty value must be beyond compare."

"He has not yet been off-planet," Slair said. "And he has encountered few aliens." He twitched the sheet from her fingers. "Get up and get dressed."

After showering, Jenny wrapped a towel around her body and went to stand at the large window set into the thick stone of the outer wall. She gazed out at a considerable spread of morning view. Even at this height she could hear buzzing, insect-y noises. By the feel of the air, it was going to be a beautiful, incredibly hot summer day.

Holding the towel, she leaned forward eagerly. Beneath the arc of pale hot sky, stretches of foliage ran through every conceivable tint and shading of yellow, gold, and amber. Only one or two patches held a greenish tinge.

She turned her attention to those parts of the house visible from her window. Since they'd arrived after dark last night, she'd caught only hazy glimpses of the exterior of this place. Memories of the corridors and stairways she'd travelled were also blurred. There had been, she recalled, an awful lot of them. So she was anxious to see just what kind of a place this was.

"My God!" she said in shock. This wasn't a *house*. It was monstrous. Huge. Some of it built into the side of a cliff, stone buildings sprawling and rambling, one or two stray wings poking out into the valley--

Her exclamation attracted Slair's attention. He came over to stand beside her, one hand on his knife and the other resting on her bare shoulder. "What is it, Jenny?"

She looked up at him. "Slair, that's not all part of your place, is it?"

"After a fashion. Over the generations, additions and alterations have been made to the original fortress. With, I might add, varying degrees of success."

Jenny glanced out again. "That's incredible. It looks like a cross between Grand Central Station and the fortifications at West Point. I mean, I knew you must have money, Slair, but *really*--"

"You almost sound distressed."

"People don't *live* in places like this. Not in real life." Jenny continued staring out the window. "Wow."

"I feel sure you will grow accustomed," Slair said dryly.

"The style of living to which I've always wanted to become accustomed," Jenny said. The words echoed in her mind. *Exactly*. The thought was acid.

With a last look at the bright day outside, Jenny drew back into the room. "Rules? Where can I go, and what, if anything, can I do?" She turned to face Slair and grinned. "And can I have a map and a bag of breadcrumbs?"

"After breakfast, I intend to show you the main areas, and explain. After that, you may do whatever you--" He stopped abruptly.

Jenny knew exactly which conversation, months earlier, he had recalled to cause him to clamp his lips together like that. "Well, just tell me while you're giving me the grand tour. It'll be considerably easier on my nervous system."

"And mine. Get dressed."

Jenny went to the closets and stood staring at her clothes. Then she frowned and bit her lip. Well, nothing ventured--she could *ask*. "Slair?"

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath. "Do I have to load on all the usual junk?"

"Junk?" he said.

"All that stupid jewelry. Piling up my hair. Makeup."

There was silence. After a moment, Jenny quickly turned to face him. He was studying her with a rather peculiar expression on his face.

*Oh, shit, what did I do wrong this time, damn it?* Jenny stiffened. "Sorry. I didn't--"

"You dislike it," he said.

Jenny shook her head. "No. I mean--it's beautiful. But it's a pain to *have* to wear it *all* the time."

"I admit it seems unnecessary at the moment," he said slowly.

"That's what I thought," Jenny said reasonably. Smiling, she added, "After all, you only dragged me home with you because you didn't know what else to do with me. Surely you don't have to play that conspicuous consumption game here, do you?"

"It is my household."

*That's right. Here you do as you like, and I do as you like.* Jenny thought he'd just given her permission, but she wanted it crystal clear. "Is it all right, then?"

Just before his gaze made her really uncomfortable, he said, "In the privacy of my holdings, you may dress as you please."

Jenny's face lit with pleasure. "Thanks."

"However, I strongly advise you to curb any impulses to exhibit your peculiar affection for the repulsive. Now, for the third time--get dressed."

"What *do* you suppose your son and his wife thought when they saw me at breakfast this morning?" Jenny said sleepily. "No, no, darling!" She scooped the kitten from the tangle it was making of the jewelry on the dressing table and cuddled it to her cheek. "Bad cat!"

"If it's a bad cat, why are you kissing it?" Slair sounded amazingly amiable.

"To show it it's in disgrace, of course," said Jenny. "haven't you ever read--" No, of course he hadn't. She gently scratched the kitten under its chin. It blinked round turquoise eyes at her and began to purr.

Slair buckled a wide belt over his jacket and sat on the bed to pull on his boots. "As for Sundaren and Corroon, I presume they thought you were, as you would so quaintly put it, a 'brain-burn case'. And you are supposed to be dressing for dinner."

Jenny rubbed the kitten's nose and set it back on the dressing table. It sat and purred at her, a fuzzy blob of cream on the dark, polished wood. Jenny scritchted its chin again and began pretending to brush her hair.

"Talking about Corroon-- Slair, can I ask you something?"

"You can ask," he said. "What is it?"

"I thought women's names--Vulcan ones--began with 't'?"

"It is the feminine prefix, yes. Corroon is only half Vulcan."

"Aha," said Jenny with enlightenment. That explained Corroon's incredibly exotic combination of Vulcan features and rich brown skin. Jenny leaned forward and rubbed her cheek against the cream kitten.

"Would you like to be called Dinah?" she asked it through a yawn. "Is that purr a yes or a no? Slair, do I have to go to dinner?"

"Yes. Aren't you hungry? You should be, after today."

"I'm more tired than anything else."

The combination of heat, sun, exercise, and unlimited quantities of unrecycled air had nearly exhausted her. After breakfast that morning, Slair had given her the promised tour. They were aided, or at least accompanied, by Semoran and Tekitta, Slair's ten-year-old daughter.



They had spent the day going up stairways, down corridors, out to stables housing strange, equinelike riding animals, and through gardens. They'd even gone across a rooftop walkway at one point. Tekitta and Semoran had soon lost their initial fascination with her peculiar appearance. The two children had swamped her with unanswerable questions, supplied her plentifully with half-comprehensible responses to her own queries, and insisted on dragging her to see every new litter of kittens in the house.

Slair's tolerance of this had flabbergasted Jenny. He hadn't even objected when Tekitta had shoved the cream kitten into Jenny's hands and calmly stated it was a present.

"Tekitten--I mean Tekitta--is a truly charming child," Jenny said, waving her hairbrush in front of Dinah's bewhiskered nose. "In fact, they're both nice kids."

"Are you fond of children, then?" Slair asked, rising and moving to stand behind her chair. "Stop yawning."

"I'm a dormouse," Jenny said in English. She continued in Standard, "No, I'm not really. Fond of children in general, I mean. I like nice, clean, polite, intelligent children. And I suspect then only in moderation."

"I see," said Slair. "Shall I consider my two young monsters to have been flattered?"

"If you like." Jenny pulled a necklace from underneath the kitten. Dinah promptly pounced. Jenny drowsily dangled the chain and let the kitten bat at it. "I bet I got sunburned today, too. How nice."

"No doubt," said Slair.

"Oh, rats, the damn thing's snarled." Jenny dropped the chain back on the dressing table and picked up her favorite necklet of honey-amber and golden filigree. She was so tired that doing anything major, such as clasping on the necklet, seemed like far too much trouble.

"Would you like me to help you with that, Jenny?" Slair asked.

"Please do," Jenny said, holding the necklet up to him.

His hands slid under her hair to rest gently around her neck. "And tell me, Jenny," he went on, in the same warm and casual voice, "just how long have you been able to understand Vulcan?"

It took a moment for the import of his question to hit. Then the blood drained from her face, leaving her ice-cold, intensely conscious of Slair's strong hands hot on her throat.

A trap. The whole day, one long lead-in to this sneaking trick. She was a fool, a *fool*. Because she was tired, and happy, and Slair'd been pleasant, she had forgotten to be careful. And answered a question she should never, never have understood. She couldn't even tell exactly when he'd made the smooth transition from Standard to Vulcan.

"Well?" Slair's hands did not tighten, but they seemed to harden.

Jenny pressed her lips together and clenched her hands on the edge of the dressing table. Their relationship had been so placidly normal recently that she'd allowed herself to fold away the knowledge of how very unpleasant life with Slair could be.

"I await your explanation with some interest." Slair's voice held malicious satisfaction.

"I--" Her voice was almost inaudible.

After another long, silent minute, Slair's hands left her neck. He moved forward to lean one hand on the dressing table, his eyes on her face.

Jenny's hands went to touch her throat. "Well, I--a couple of months. If people don't go too fast. Or--or get too technical." She paused, waiting, but he said nothing. "I can't speak it, though. But I wasn't trying to. I only wanted to be able to . . . understand . . . it . . . when you and . . ."

Her sentence, which had become progressively slower and more faltering, died away altogether. There was uncomfortable silence.

Jenny suddenly picked up the kitten again and hugged it tightly, closing her eyes. Of course, even if she did have a vague, insane notion he wouldn't hit her while she was holding the animal, all he had to do was take it away from her and *then* hit her.

"I see. An eminently logical idea."

To her astonishment, he sounded perfectly calm about it, his voice lacking the hard edges of anger. She opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"Yes." He straightened. "I should have considered the possibility myself. You may be a barbarian, but you're not stupid."

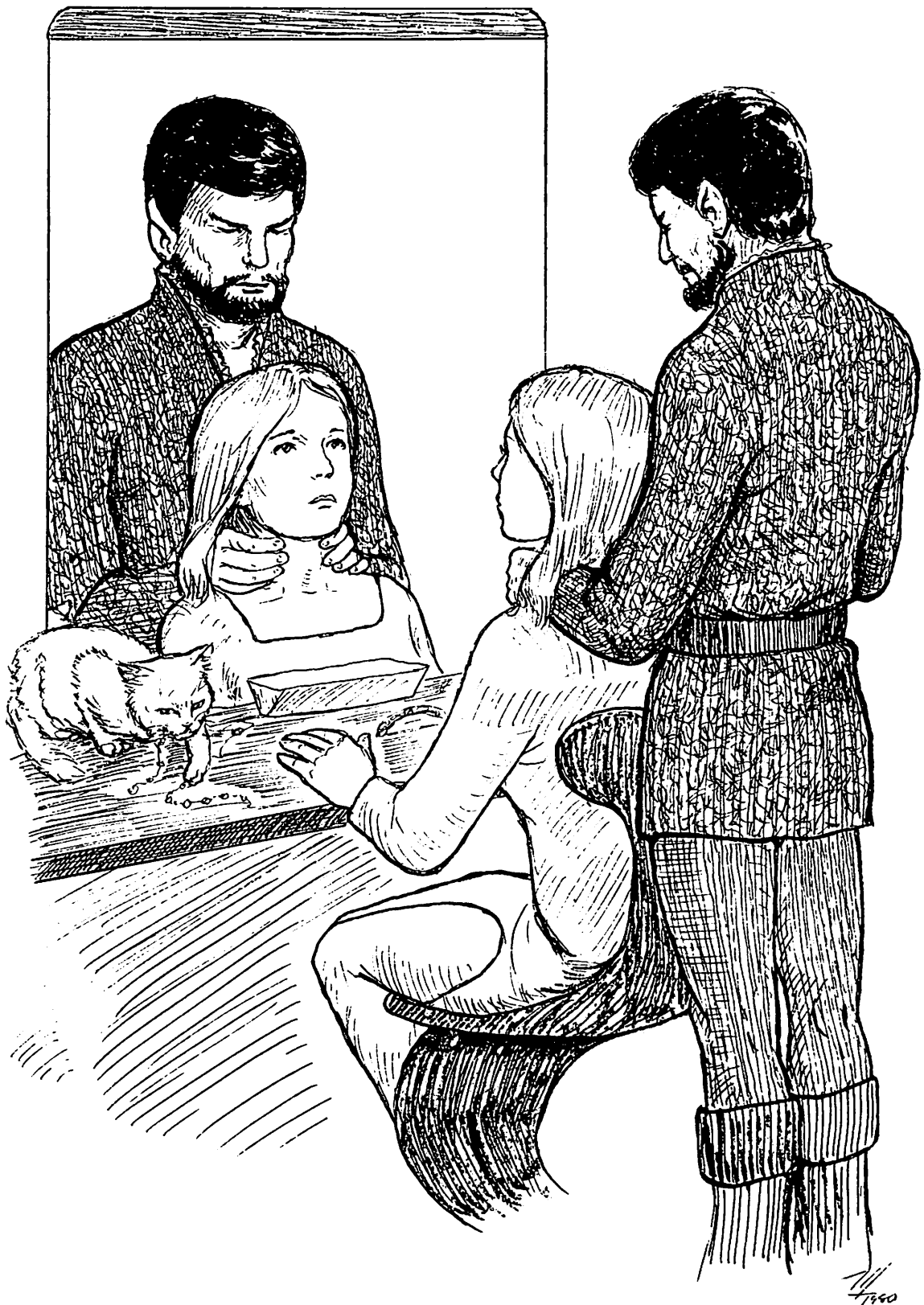
"Even if I *am* provincial." Jenny regretted the words the instant they were out of her mouth.

Slair's eyebrow lifted. "Does that still rankle?" He put his hand under her chin. "You need not look so apprehensive."

"I thought you'd be furious," Jenny said unsteadily. "You've been really angry about less important things. I can never tell. . . ."

Dinah wriggled. Slair took her from Jenny and set the ruffled kitten back on the dressing table. Dinah glared at them both and began washing her tail furiously.

Jenny shot a glance up at Slair. "And you know perfectly well what a coward I am." She gripped the edge of the dressing table again, her hands tight on the gleaming wood. "I don't want you angry at me. It is not my idea of--enjoyment."



"I do not intend to permit spying on my activities," Slair said after a moment. "But that you even attempted it is encouraging evidence that you possess a normal sense of self-preservation."

So he thought she was funny. Again. "Thanks a lot. Slair?"

"Yes?"

"How did you find out? I was so careful. . . ."

"I wondered yesterday, when I was talking to Sundaren. Your reaction to our comments on Commodore Thelfel was revealing."

"Oh, damn," said Jenny wearily. "Those stupid commodores always were more trouble than they were worth. All right, now what?"

Slair handed her the hairbrush and necklet. "Now finish dressing. And, since you already understand Vulcan, you may as well learn to speak it properly. It will simplify matters considerably."

"Oh." Jenny stared at brush and necklet, then took them. "Well, it'll be a lot easier learning it openly. Faster, too. That hypnoteach routine?"

To her surprise, Slair shook his head. He glanced at her, then said, "That method is fast, and most effective. It is not necessarily safe."

"Oh," said Jenny again, voice flat. Those horrible headaches, the aching teeth--she didn't want to know what other effects hypnoteaching could have. Slavers wouldn't care either, as long as it left them with enough people for them to make a profit.

"Now that that is settled--" Slair said meaningfully, moving toward the door.

Jenny yanked the brush quickly through her hair. She eyed the golden necklet with an odd sense of distaste and set it down beside Dinah. She put her hand to her neck for a second, then stood and followed Slair.

That brief, nasty interlude over, Jenny found life in Slair's home very pleasant. Here Slair didn't give a damn what she did all day, so long as she was at dinner, and in bed when he wanted her. After one large evening party, apparently to welcome Slair back and take care of Sundaren and Corroon's social obligations for the next six months, everything was soothingly low-key.

The day after the party, Jenny sat against the large tree in the family's walled garden. Her book had fallen to her lap, and she was more than half asleep. Dinah had taken advantage of this to curl up over the pages of the book.

"Jenny?"

Jenny roused herself. "Oh, hi, Tekitta. What is it?"

Slair's daughter stood regarding her with suppressed eagerness. "Jenny, you'd like to go to the zoo, wouldn't you?"

"I'd love to." Then something in Tekitta's tone made Jenny suspicious. "Why?"

Tekitta's grey-gold eyes widened. "You'd *like* to see the zoo. It's got a--"

"Don't give me that," said Jenny. "This sounds awfully familiar, somehow. What are you up to, Tekitta?"

She carefully did not smile--much--at the expression of chagrin on Tekitta's face. *Sorry, kid, I've had that pulled on me before.* Jenny stroked Dinah and waited for Tekitta to figure out a story.

Tekitta moved closer and sat beside Jenny. She also patted the kitten, then looked up at Jenny. "We can't go without a grownup. You're a grownup, aren't you?"

"Sometimes," Jenny said. She gave in to the impulse to ruffle the little girl's curly dark hair. "Sorry, Tekitta," she said, as the child pulled back. "It's my natural tendency to create disorder. Sure, I'll be glad to go to the zoo, if I can. But what about the guards? Can't--"

"You know they don't count," Tekitta said. "Tevis and Tarek used to go with us, but--"

"Who?" said Jenny.

"My sisters," said Tekitta impatiently. "But they're so--"

"*What?*" said Jenny, sitting upright with a jerk. Goddamn it, Slair'd sworn he only had three kids. Calmly, so she wouldn't scare Tekitta off, Jenny said, "But Tekitta, I thought your father only had you, Semoran, and Sundaren."

"Well, he does," said Tekitta, in an *'everybody knows that'* tone. "Tevis and Tarek and Sov are mother's. And they don't live with us anymore, and besides, they think they're too old to have to take me and Semoran places."

"And how old are they?" asked Jenny sweetly. She had a peculiar feeling that they were *not* older than Sundaren, from the sound of that last aggrieved statement.

Tekitta's brows drew together in thought. "Tevis is twenty-four, I think. Tarek's twenty, and Sov's--"

"Thank you, Tekitta," said Jenny. That was quite enough of that. "You can tell Semoran that I'll be delighted to take you to the zoo, if it's all right with your father. Now scram. I've got--"

"What's that?" said Tekitta. "'Scram'?"

"It's my language," Jenny said. "English. It means 'please go away now'."

"All right." Tekitta bounced to her feet. "Thank you, Jenny." She bobbed a small curtsy and then ran off, hair and short loose dress flying.

"Jesus H. Christ, what a household," said Jenny, staring after her. Well, at least that explained the huge age gap between Sundaren, who was in his early thirties, and his ten-year-old sister. And since Slair's wife had only died five years ago, obviously Slair hadn't killed her for infidelity unless it had taken him almost a quarter of a century to get around to it.

Once Sundaren and Corroon discovered that Jenny, far from being bored and inciting the household to riot, was almost pathetically eager to be liked, they too relaxed. Corroon, in fact, had what Jenny considered a most un-Vulcan taste for gossip, and was glad to have Jenny's willing attention.

Jenny obtained a great deal of information from Sundaren's wife, as well as some really concrete help. Corroon had been quite shocked to learn that, among other deficiencies, Jenny didn't know how to dance.

"You can take lessons with Tekitta," Corroon said firmly. "That is, if you like. I'm surprised Slair didn't do something about it."

"I'm not," said Jenny, watching Corroon's dark hands expertly wielding an embroidery needle and scarlet thread. She still admired Corroon's appearance. Sundaren's wife wasn't beautiful, but the combination of dark bronze-brown skin, slanted eyebrows, and pointed ears was so stunning that it was hard to realize that.

Corroon raised her head and exchanged a speaking glance with Jenny. Jenny had no compunction about smiling. She had a pretty good idea that Slair's daughter-in-law was fond of him but thought he was crazy.



Corroon

"Thank you, Corroon. I'd love to learn to dance," Jenny said. "Gee, that's pretty," she added, looking at the embroidery as Corroon held it up to study it critically.

"Good," Corroon said. "And if you'd like, I can teach you how to do this, as well."

"That might be a good idea, at that," said Jenny. She'd never felt the least desire to sew before, but with those long stretches of empty time on that damned spaceship--

"All right," said Corroon. "Jenny, put down that book and come here. I'll show you how to start."

Smiling, Jenny closed the book. She was becoming fond of Corroon, who was informative, kind, and helpful. Sundaren's wife reminded her of someone. *One of my friends? I don't know anyone with that quiet, housewifely air.*

Jenny sat gazing at Corroon, whose head was again bent over her needlework. Corroon wore a long, full-skirted gown, and her thick mass of hair was confined in a yellow snood. *Damn it, that looks familiar. Quiet, assured competence--*

"Come along, Jenny."

*--and slightly managing. Of course I know you. Little Women.*

"Yes, Meg," said Jenny meekly, as she rose to her feet. *Too bad I'm no Jo; I'd do a lot better.*

And so, for the first time, Jenny was able to wander zoos, museums, and other areas of uplift and interest. Once they'd discovered an adult willing to be dragged to see almost anything, Tekitta and Semoran exploited this advantage shamelessly.

They were well-behaved children, for the most part, and Jenny enjoyed their company--particularly after she had put her foot down and squashed their initial notion that they could get away with anything with her.

"Kitta, I do *not* believe you're allowed to eat three desserts," Jenny said severely.

"Nourin let us when *he* took us places."

"Yes," said Semoran, his face the picture of soulful innocence.

"You don't even remember him!" Tekitta told him with great superiority.

"I do!" Semoran said indignantly.

Jenny cut through this. "I don't know who 'Nourin' is--"

"He used to work with father," Tekitta said helpfully.

"--but I bet he didn't let you get away with three desserts. However," Jenny added, regarding their mutinous faces, "I'll tell you what, kids. We'll call your father and ask *him*."

This suggestion met with a lack of enthusiasm from the children.

"Besides, two desserts are enough for anyone, so stop looking as if you're starving, Randy," Jenny said. "Now, what else is there to see in this museum?"

"I want to talk to Selsam for a minute, father," Sundaren said. "Go on, I'll meet you at home."

Slair nodded and turned his mount's head toward the main path. "Come, Jenny."



Semoran & Tekitta



Jenny hauled her own marrol's head up from the yellow-green grass. After a moment's urging, it ambled down the path. Jenny lost patience and slammed her heels into its barrel-round sides, and it finally broke into the fast, rolling pace that was this species' substitute for a trot.

"Stupid animal," she said when she caught up with Slair. "And I wish these things came in a larger size. If they weren't so round, my feet would be dragging on the ground."

Slair ignored this. Once Jenny was beside him, he said, "What was so amusing back there?"

"Oops," said Jenny. They'd stopped at the farm so Sundaren could speak to that Selsam person. In addition to the farmer and his wife, there had been at least eight children running around. Jenny, recalling the fan theory that there was a real problem keeping the Vulcan population level up, had been unwary enough to grin and say, "*Pon farr* is fun, huh?" in English.

"And I believe you've mention 'pon farr' before, as I recall," Slair said.

"Your memory is too damn good," Jenny informed him. "Stop that!" she added sharply to her little mount. Her quick yank on the reins pulled the marrol's nose from a choice clump of leaves. The animal turned its head and gave her an aggrieved look. "Forget it. I'm too old to fall for that gambit," Jenny said, slapping it lightly on its sleek, thick-muscled brown neck.

"I had no idea you could be so hard-hearted," Slair commented.

"Downright brutal, in fact," Jenny said, scratching the marrol's neck.

"This time, however, I do *not* withdraw the question."

"Oh." Jenny could tell he intended to get to the bottom of the subject. Then she cast a sidelong glance at him. It just might serve him jolly well right, at that. "You want to know all about *pon farr*, Slair?"

He regarded her with caution. "I thought I did. Why are you smiling like that? I don't like that peculiar tone of voice, either."

Jenny stared up into the cloudless sky. "*Pon farr* is the Vulcan mating cycle," she said, in a carelessly casual voice.

"Oh, really? I didn't know we had one. Odd that I never noticed."

Jenny slid another glance at him. "If you think *that's* funny, wait until I *explain* it. Shall I?"

Slair studied her for a moment, the corner of his mouth curving up. "Why not?"

"Well, you see, there's an episode I haven't told you about yet, called 'Amok Time'--"

"That is one of the stupidest ideas I've ever heard, even from you," Slair said after she'd completed her explanation of the episode. "An unlikely way for a species to develop, at best."

"And then there are the fan stories," said Jenny, ostentatiously studying her fingernails.

"Well?" said Slair after a minute.

"Well, you should *see* some of those *pon farr* stories--or maybe you shouldn't. Of course, D.C. Fontana said it was *at least* every seven years, not *only*," Jenny added fairmindedly. "But that's still no excuse for--"

Slair pulled his mount to a halt. Jenny's marrol stopped and began to browse happily on the low bushes. As Jenny's explanation became a dissertation, Slair also let his mount graze, leaning his hand on the pommel of the saddle as he listened to Jenny. Aside from interrupting once to say, "It is rather difficult to follow this. Endeavor to stop laughing quite so frequently," he remained silent.

Jenny went happily through the relatively chaste early *pon farr* stories, more recent lurid *pon farr* stories, and mentioned some of the articles and theories. After a one-sided debate with her saner self, she flung good sense to the winds. "There are even some people who think that Kirk and Spock--"

When she'd finished *that*, she almost thought Slair was going to laugh, but he stopped at the smiling stage. That was better than she usually did.

She finally ran out of inspiration. "Well?" she said, looking at Slair hopefully. After hearing herself spill all that, she was even more impressed at the way she'd managed to avoid the *pon farr* topic until now.

Slair shook his head. Then his smile vanished. He turned an intent, appraising look on her.

"What is it?" Jenny gathered up the reins, overruling the marrol's strenuous objections to having its snack interrupted.

Slair edged his mount toward hers and put a hand on her reins. "Considering what you have just told me, I am surprised that you did not die of fright when I asked you to be a *Vulcan* officer's lady."

Jenny stared down at her hands and absently scratched the marrol's neck again. "You know, I didn't even think about the *pon farr* business at that point. I did later." She could still remember how ill that little thought had made her feel.

"You surprise me. From what you have said, it should have been the first thing that sprang to your mind."

"I'm glad it didn't. Besides," Jenny raised her gaze to his face, "Slair, I don't think you ever did have the least idea of how--how stunned I was those first few days."

"That was, of course, why you were so calm. I realized that later."

Jenny nodded. "Look, I'm a science fiction fan. I mean, I could understand spaceships. Aliens. Even a galactic empire. But when that cell door opened and I walked into STAR TREK-- It's a *TV show*, it's *fake*. I was so--so--"

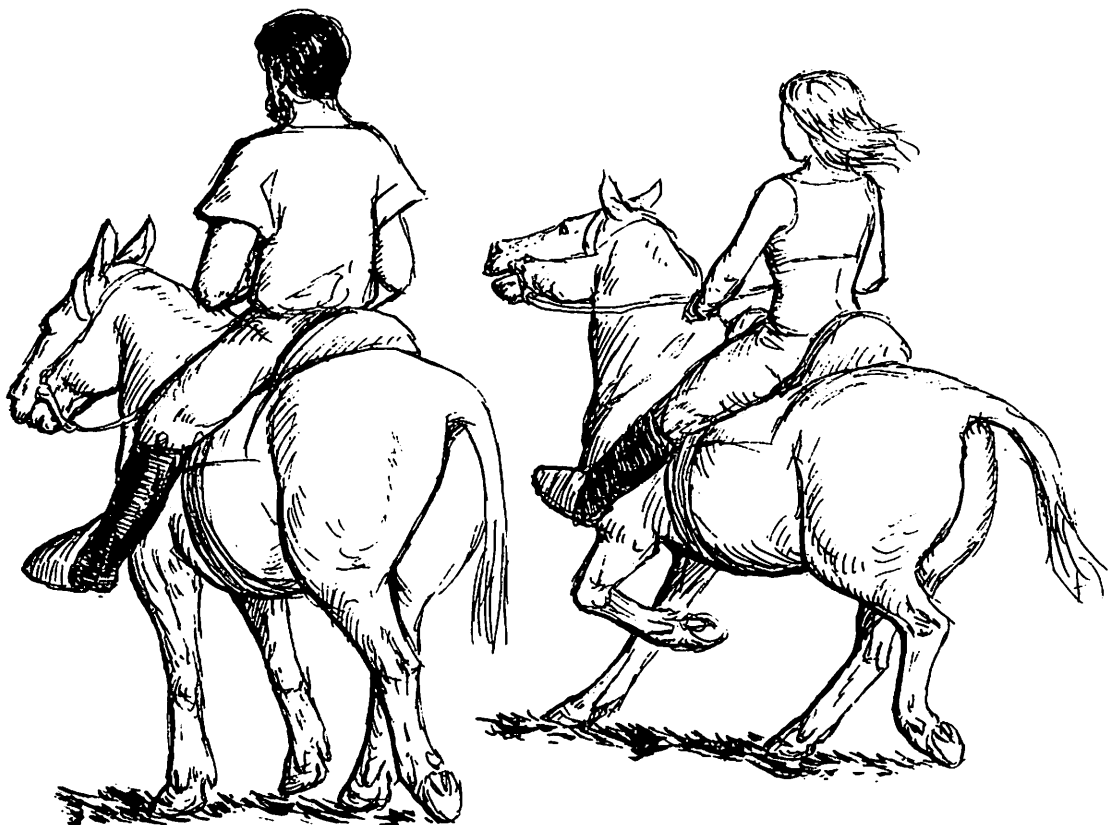
"Surprised?" Slair suggested.

She laughed, without mirth. "That is, of course, one word for it."

"Jenny?" Slair's voice was slightly questioning.

She shook her head and smiled at him. "Anyway, another reason *pon farr* didn't worry me to start with was your attitude. You certainly didn't seem to be in the grip of red-hot passion."

She was rewarded by a real, if fleeting, smile from Slair. "Hardly," he agreed. He lifted an eyebrow. "And that first night?"



7/1980

"That conversation was *insane*," said Jenny. "You're lucky I didn't have screaming hysterics."

"As are you," he said. He released her reins and rode forward. Jenny stared after him for a second, then kicked her own animal into motion.

Time slipped by easily. Riding with Slair or the children, dance lessons with Tekitta, talking with Corroon, exploring the house, sitting around doing nothing but patting Dinah and soaking up sun-- It hadn't even rained once in the month she'd been here.

Jenny stretched and leaned more comfortably on the pillows of the bed. It was too bad she couldn't go anywhere today, but Slair and Sundaren had some sort of business meeting going on with somebody or other. She, Corroon, and the kids had been strictly confined to the family's quarters for the duration. It must be a pretty odd sort of business. Jenny shrugged and went back to reading.

Later that afternoon, she looked up as Slair entered the bedroom. Her smile faded as she saw his face. *Oh, God, is he furious.* She had an instant desire to be somewhere else, preferably on another planet.

Slair stalked over to the closet, pulling off his tunic. His muscles were tense, as if he controlled himself only by great effort.

*Oh, shit,* Jenny thought, quietly closing her book and edging cautiously to the side of the bed. *That must have been a FANTASTIC meeting. I'm getting out of here.* It was too bad there was no way to leave the room without moving.

As she slid her legs off the bed, Slair seemed to notice her for the first time. He kicked off his boots and strode over to the bed. He stared down at her, his eyes coldly yellow. Then his hand shot out, sending her back down to the bed. The force he used almost turned the shove to a blow.

*Oh, no--* Jenny'd stopped expecting this sort of thing. Not here, where it was so peaceful and normal. "Slair--"

Slair let his belt and pants drop to the floor. Kicking them aside, he sat down heavily beside Jenny and grabbed her arm. He jerked her over to him, imprisoning her other arm with a painful grip on her wrist.

Initial confusion gave way to trapped panic. Jenny had the eerie impression that Slair didn't see *her* at all. "Wait a minute." As usual during moments of stress, she fell automatically into English. "Slair, take it easy." She tried to pull her wrist free of his grasp.

He tightened his fingers even more. "Speak Standard," he snapped, with a sharp, emphasizing jerk of her wrist. He released her other arm, moving to unfasten the shoulder hooks of her light tunic.

Jenny tried to push him away with her freed hand, knowing even as

she did that it wouldn't work. Slair knocked her hand away. Another rough shove pushed her flat on the mattress.

Slair yanked the tunic from her shoulders. He leaned across her, pinning her body under his, and pressed his mouth on hers in a harsh contact that nearly jarred her teeth.

Jenny made another futile effort to push Slair off, earning only another trapped and twisted wrist. Oddly enough, this returned a measure of reason to her. All she was now was something Slair could work out anger on. In this mood, he'd probably just as soon beat her as rape her. There was no point in irritating him more by resisting, or she'd really get hurt.

*He's so damn much stronger--* Jenny made a deliberate effort to go limp, hoping to ease the pain in her wrists. Vulcan strength wasn't intriguing confronted directly.

As Jenny ceased to struggle, Slair released one of her wrists, moving his fingers to her hip. He placed his mouth on hers again in another bruising non-kiss.

Underlying her physical fear, an angry urge arose to slap his bearded face. Tears pricked her eyes. She squeezed her lids shut to block them. *If I let him get away with this*, Jenny thought, *cold even under the heat of Slair's body, I'll be sunk.*

She didn't have the slightest idea how to make him let go of her. As she racked her brain for some brilliant remark that would defuse the situation, Slair shifted, fastening his hand on the waistband of her slacks. The change in his position placed too much stress on her already aching arm.

"Let me go," she said desperately. "You're hurting me. Slair, *please.*" In spite of her efforts at control, tears oozed from her tight-closed eyes, trailing down her temples to her hair. "I know you don't care, but please, stop it."

There was a long silence.

*Oh, that was brilliant, all right. That will really placate--*

The hurting pull on her wrists and arm ceased. Jenny opened her eyes as Slair removed his hands from her and sat up. After a moment, Jenny slowly pushed herself to sit facing him. Her unfastened tunic fell to lie around her hips. She pulled it up to mop at her eyes, let it drop again.

Slair didn't say anything. Jenny began gently massaging her throbbing wrist. Bruises were already beginning to show.

Slair reached over and took her hand, turning it to eye the livid marks along her wrist. He looked back up, meeting her eyes. His face was no longer stiff and withdrawn, merely impassive, and his eyes were back to their normal grey-yellow.

Jenny drew a deep, shaking breath of relief. "You're a lot stronger than I am," she said, a tremor in her voice. "Maybe you'd be really sorry if you broke my arm. But I'd rather you didn't, if you don't mind."

Slair looked down at her hand again. "I did not intend to injure you."

Jenny clenched her other hand, shoving it under the fabric of her tunic to hide it. Maybe not, but she wasn't at all sure being raped would have been preferable to being beaten. Neither prospect had any appeal. At least he *had* stopped.

"You're not supposed to take out anger on other people," Jenny said. If she could only get Slair amused, she'd be able to relax again. "Especially those who can't fight back."

"Why not?" said Slair, sounding honestly puzzled. "Surely even you can see that it would be foolhardy to attempt to release--frustrations--on those more powerful."

"I set myself up for that one, didn't I?" Jenny observed. *And so you came to slam me. I bet everyone else disappeared into the woodwork before you could see them.*

"And I suppose you never took advantage of a superior position to allow exasperation free rein?" Slair rubbed his thumb lightly over the palm of her hand.

"Yes," said Jenny, thinking back. "I regret to say I did. Verbally. But sometimes that's worst of all. And you can never take it back, no matter how sorry you are. Sometimes everyone does stupid things."

Slair regarded her evenly. Then he raised his eyebrows slightly, and the corner of his mouth twitched up. "How true."

The remaining tension drained from Jenny's shoulders. She started to smile back at him. Her lips froze in mid-curve.

Jenny?" said Slair, closing his fingers gently on her hand.

*Many women have lived like this very nicely. Keeping a man amused to keep themselves safe. What makes you think you're so special you can have it both ways?* She ducked her head as more tears, unexpected this time, stung her yes.

Slair let go of her hand. "Jenny?" he repeated. He touched her shoulder.

"Slair--" Jenny rubbed vigorously at her eyes. She tried to begin again in a cool and rational manner. "Look, I sleep with you, and I don't mind that, I-- Slair, please don't use me as an emotional punching bag!" she burst out. "It obviously means less than nothing to you. But I can't stand having people angry at me. It makes me sick!"

"I was not angry at *you*," Slair said, his brows drawing together.  
"Why--"

"That's even worse," Jenny muttered, sniffing. "I like things pleasant. And peaceful. Why do you think I do whatever you say?"

"I see," he said after a pause.

Jenny pulled her tunic over her head and wiped her face with it. That whole ugly interlude couldn't have lasted more than five minutes, but her muscles were stiffening in several places and she already knew she was going to have large bruise marks. She suspected that Slair just didn't know his own strength when dealing with humans.

She lowered herself carefully to rest on the bed, pulling a pillow toward her. "Rampaging emotion always exhausts me." Rolling onto her stomach, she hid her face in the pillow.

A moment later, she felt Slair's hand on the curve of her back, hot on her skin. "How tired are you?" he said, with almost clinical detachment.

Jenny twisted to look up at him. He slid his hand up her back and brushed the hair from her cheek. Her mouth tightened, and she hesitated, regarding Slair with narrowed eyes. She *didn't* feel like it, God damn him.

*It's not your choice, stupid. You have no right to refuse him anything.* She sighed and rolled onto her back, holding out her hand to Slair.

He placed his hand on her shoulder, resting some of his weight on it. The expression of subdued amusement that had been on his face a moment ago had disappeared. "It was a question." He lifted his hand and sat back.

Jenny pushed herself up on her elbows. She swallowed hard and shook back her hair. The corners of her mouth jerked up uncertainly. "Well . . . it does seem a shame to waste the fact that there's only one piece of clothing left between the pair of us. I guess."

Slair lifted one dark eyebrow. Then he leaned forward, pushing her gently down to the bed.

† †            † †            † †

"Back?" said Jenny blankly several weeks later. She set down her hairbrush and turned to look across the bedroom at Slair.

"To the ship. You do recall it?"

"Oh. Right. Vacation's over. Slair--will you be assigned to another ship?" she said hopefully.

"I go nowhere but the *Victory*," he said curtly.

Jenny quickly turned back to the mirror and stared down at the dressing table. *No. I don't want to go back there.*

"Do you wish to choose clothing in Roneth with Corroon's assistance, or wait until we--"

"More clothes?" said Jenny, twisting to look at him. "What for? I've already got enough for two people."

"Perhaps you wish to listen to the comments that would be made if you reappear in those. I do not." Slair walked over to stand by her chair. "I remind you, Jenny, that they are part of your--"

"I know," Jenny said quickly. Her salary. "Of course. Commander Slair's employee can't be seen in last season's dress. High fashion and low morals. I suppose you want me to get new jewelry, too?"

Slair put his hand under her chin and tilted her head back. "I do not know what is wrong--but stop it." His voice was sharp-edged. "Most women *like* jewelry."

"I'm weird," said Jenny flatly.

"That I know," Slair said, sliding his hand up to her cheek.

Jenny smiled quickly at him and leaned her face against the heat of his hand. "I'm sorry, Slair. I think-- I wish I were staying here. This is a really horrible thing for a fan to have to admit, but I *hate* that stupid ship."

"Unfortunate," he said.

Jenny shrugged and straightened. "Yes, well . . . "

As she looked up at Slair, a sudden and hilariously lovely idea occurred to her. If he insisted on giving her more jewelry . . . A slow, evil smile lit her face as she contemplated the idea. *Oh, yes. That would be a real riot. Why the hell didn't I ever think of this before? What could possibly be more appropriate?*

"Slair?"

"What is it, Jenny?" He hooked his hands on his belt, eyeing her watchfully. His face was stiff and his voice suspicious.

Jenny's smile widened. She should use saccharine-honey tones more often if they had that effect. "Slair, if you really want to give me another necklace, there's a design I'd like. Here, I'll show you."

She glanced around the dressing table's somewhat cluttered surface and then scooped up a jar of iridescent blue-silver eyeshadow. Using the clinging powder, she drew a circle on the wood, then a triangle. "There. Like--"



There was a short, harsh word she couldn't understand from Slair, and his hand shot out to smear the design to a powder-blur. "An idic," he said. "An *idic*--"

Jenny froze in her chair. She'd done it again--and she'd never seen Slair react like that to anything trekkish before. So 'idic' was a real word, then, but what the *hell*--?

"Well?" Slair snapped.

She hadn't seen his face that grim in a long time. "STAR TREK," she said faintly. "Roddenberry designed it. It--it was a Vulcan--"

"He designed it," said Slair in a level voice. "Of course."

"Slair," said Jenny hesitantly, "what's the matter?" Well, she always had thought that 'infinite diversity in infinite combinations' acronym was too much to be believed. But what in God's name had dear old Gene pulled this time?

"That brilliant notion you found so amusing," Slair said, tapping the blue-silver smudge on the dressing table, "could have had me tried for high treason and my family under attainder." His voice was hard.

"Jesus," said Jenny. "But-- What *is* an idic, then?"

"It *was* the device of our royal family," Slair said, staring down at the shadow-smear. "When our system was absorbed by the Empire, the symbol was banned. Its display or use is treason. The flaunting of it publically as a necklace as you suggest--" He seemed at a loss for an adequate finish to the sentence.

"Oh." That would probably have had her under arrest in one minute flat, and under Imperial interrogation in two. *And you know THEIR methods, Watson.* Jenny grabbed Slair's hand and gripped it tightly.

"This is to go no farther than this room," he said.

"Oh, absolutely," Jenny said slowly. *God, Roddenberry's idea of humor!* She suddenly realized she was still clutching Slair's hand and promptly released it. "Roddenberry and his stupid jokes."

*Lincoln Enterprises. Kris Trott and her custom-made idics. Jenny choked and put her hands over her mouth to muffle unexpected laughter. Idic rings. Idic earrings. Idic jean patches. Idic bumperstickers. Idics all over fandom, all over--*

Slair pulled her hands from her mouth. "Listen to me, Jenny; this is not--"

"Don't worry," Jenny said, her voice shaking with laughter. "You can rely on my utter discretion. It'll be our little secret, Commander. Just you and me, and--and the other six million fans who all bought idics."

She took a deep breath and glanced at Slair's rigid face. Well, he deserved to look apprehensive. "Do you realize Roddenberry foisted that thing off as the oldest, most revered symbol of Vulcan pacifism and logic, *and we all fell for it?*"

There was a brief silence, broken by badly-stifled giggles from Jenny. She finally said, "Oh, dear."

After a long pause, Slair said, "That seems an inadequate comment, under the circumstances."

"It's just lucky I never thought of mentioning it before, in front of anyone else," Jenny said. "That would have been great, wouldn't it?"

"Even you would have failed to find that funny," he said.

"I know," she said. "I know. But still, just thinking about what that man pulled--" She put her hands over her mouth again.

"Don't," Slair told her quickly.

Jenny swallowed her laughter, wiped her hands over her eyes, and discovered Slair watching her with a strange expression on his face.

"After all this time, an idic," he said softly. He seized her wrist, and pulled her to her feet. "And what else?"

Jenny shook her head. "I don't know. There's so *much*. It's been *ten years*, Slair. And so much of it's nothing but silly--"

"Jokes?" he said. "Exactly."

"Yes," said Jenny. Silly jokes, half from fandom, half from the show. And after ten years, who remembered which was which? It would be so incredibly easy for that sort of thing to slip out if she stopped being careful.

*Of course. He's thinking how easy it would have been for me to let it slide when I was out with his children. How I might have decided that what Tekitta really needed was an idic necklace.*

"Nothing but silly jokes," she repeated.

"I remind you, Jenny, that you are to mention STAR TREK to no one." His fingers tightened on her wrist. "To *no one*, even in jest."

"Slair, do you think I'm a suicidal maniac?" said Jenny hotly.

His eyebrows shot up.

"I--I mean--"

Slair released her wrist. "No, I do not."

*'Warped, yes; suicidal, no.'* The damndest things reassure him. . . .

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"Let this be a lesson to you, stupid," Jenny told herself severely a few days later, as she gloomily threw things into her luggage. "Be more careful what you wish for. You may get it, and serve you jolly well right."

Life on the *Victory* might be galactic exploration, but it was also a rather confined existence. As for the noble, dedicated personnel . . .

She closed the trunk and stepped back, hands on hips, trying to decide whether she'd overlooked anything. Slair had given her permission to take back pretty much what she pleased, with the usual proviso that it not inconvenience him. He had also warned her sternly against bringing Dinah.

"Where the devil did all this junk come from, anyway?" she demanded.

"What's the matter, Jenny?" Semoran, sitting cross-legged on the bed next to a pile of sleeping cat, regarded her gravely. "Don't you want to go back to space? Isn't it amus--interesting?"

"That depends on what you're doing." Jenny ran her fingers through her hair. Sighing, she pulled off the clasp holding her hair in a ponytail. She shook her head and walked over to the dressing table.

The mirror there reflected a slightly rumpled person with a tanned face and sunstreaked hair. *Now that's me. I'm no glossy officer's lady.* But with vacation over, it was back to makeup, carefully done hair, and high fashion. As for the plain sleeveless shirt and shorts she was wearing, she might just as well leave those here. On the *Victory*, Slair probably wouldn't even let her wear them when she was hanging around his quarters.

"You never know when some charming s.o.b. will drop in," she said in English. "Oh, *shit!*"

"What does that mean?" Semoran inquired in an interested tone.

"Never you mind," she told him. "What happened to my comb? Randy, you little monster, I think you're sitting on it."

Semoran bounced. "Yes," he agreed. He held out the comb. "Here. Was it vulgar?" His voice was eager.

Jenny took the proffered comb. "I have quite enough problems without getting involved in teaching you alien profanity. Your brother would *really* have a fit. You'll just have to struggle along with what you know of respectable English." She began to drag the comb through her hair, snarling subvocally.

"I talk English," Semoran said in that language. "Gooder than Tekitta."

"Better than," she corrected automatically. "And I'll also agree before you say it, you smug little creep, that you speak English a lot better than I speak Vulcan."

Semoran looked immodestly pleased with himself. "Will you send me a letter from the *Victory*? Father does."

"Not that he ever seems to *tell* anyone anything," Jenny said. "Just don't hold your breath waiting for a letter from *me*. I'm a rotten correspondent. Now what the hell did I do with that stupid makeup case?"

"You packed it. In there." Semoran pointed to the trunk.

Jenny looked at the ceiling. "Why me?" Then she went back to kneel beside the trunk. Semoran climbed down from the bed and joined her.

He watched her pawing through the contents of the trunk. "It was one of the first things you put in," he offered helpfully.

"It would be." She finally simply dumped most of the packed items out on the floor. Picking up the makeup case, she glared at it balefully.

Semoran began to drop various articles back into the trunk. "You're funny," he observed.

"I'm glad everyone finds me so entertaining. Your brother thinks I'm a real riot."

Semoran looked at her uncertainly. Jenny succumbed to an almost irresistible impulse and ruffled his soft black hair into complete disarray. "Don't look so worried, Ran. It was just a joke, of sorts. Sun-daren's all right." *He's just a mundane who thinks I'm crazy.*

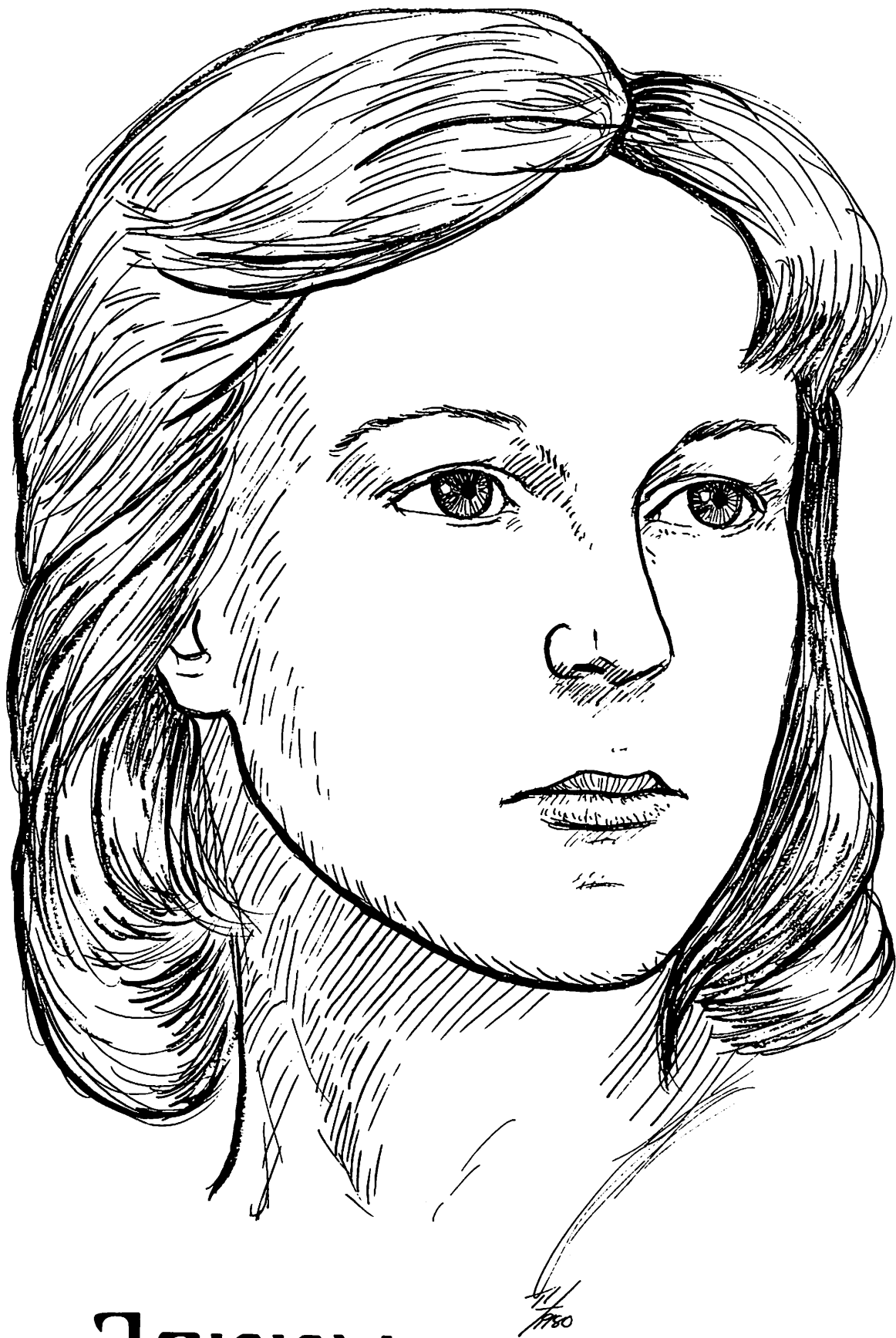
For once, Semoran, didn't immediately push his hair back into place. He put his hands behind his back and stared at her, his amber eyes wide. "Are you coming back the next time father comes home?"

"I have no idea." Jenny wasn't going to make any idiotically rash promises to a small child she was fond of. "I hope so, but if he doesn't bring me, I'm sure he'll have something else just as amusing for you. A *Tyranosaurus rex*, say." She grinned at his expression. "Now scram, Randy. I have to get dressed."

She watched as his forehead wrinkled in deep thought. "You remember 'scram'. It means 'please go away'. And the other thing's a--a lizard. Go on. I'll see you and Kitty again before we leave, you know."

Semoran nodded. Then he put his hand on her head and mussed her hair with a quick motion. He stepped back.

Jenny looked blank for a moment. Then she started to laugh. She'd once told Semoran it was a Terran gesture of affection when he'd questioned her compulsion to tousle his hair. "The things kids remember-- Thanks, Semoran. Scram, now."



Jenny

After he'd gone, Jenny finished tossing stray odds and ends back into the trunk, and closed it again. "You've got to get dressed," she told herself severely, as she went to flop on the bed beside the cat.

She ran her hand over the creamy fur and Dinah stretched, made a 'prrp'-ing noise, and went rag-limp again. "Darling Dinah," said Jenny, rubbing her cheek against the small cat. "Oh, God, I don't want to go back to that spaceship. I shouldn't *have* to. It isn't *fair*."

She sat up and hauled Dinah to lie purring in her lap. Fair or not, there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. Or, as Slair had said when she'd once asked him about her legal status, "A slave? I had to buy you out of the ship's cut to hire you." He'd paid himself back out of what would have been the first portion of her salary, so--

"Of course you're not a slave--technically," he'd said.

"I just adore technicalities," Jenny said bitterly to Dinah, who in the past two months had grown by leaps and bounds and pounces. "You won't even remember me, will you, Dinah?"

Assuming, of course, that she ever came back.

# Part four

## Stair's Lady

When Jenny and Slair entered the familiar set of rooms on the *Victory*, Sendak was there, his attention on several small, shiny objects. He looked up at their entrance. His face froze at the sight of Jenny.

"Well?" said Slair.

"Just the usual collection, Commander." Sendak's eyes remained on Jenny, who shifted uneasily. "This is the secondary checkout. Tavra cleared your quarters earlier."

"Good. The dampers are set?"

Sendak nodded. Slair indicated the door with his hand, and Sendak collected his equipment and left, much to Jenny's relief. Most of Slair's operatives made her feel distinctly uncomfortable--particularly Sendak and Caldor. She was mean enough to cherish the expression on the latter's face when he'd seen her a little earlier.

Now she looked to Slair, who held a device similar to those Sendak had been using. "What was that all about?"

"Merely the routine check for surveillance transmitters." He studied the device for a moment, then set it on the desk.

"Do you mean to tell me," said Jenny after a short pause, "that every time they overhaul this stupid ship they plant new listening gadgets all over it? And every time people come back, they automatically pull them all out? Why bother, for God's sweet sake, if everyone knows all about it?"

"There is always the chance that someone will overlook something," Slair said.

"I never *heard* of such a colossal waste of time."

Slair looked at her, his eyes glinting, and raised an eyebrow. "That is an odd comment, considering--"

"I should never have mentioned the time I spent all day hand-cranking that mimeo," said Jenny.



"However, I suspect the primary purpose is to keep Research and Development alert and productive."

"That sounds typical," said Jenny in disgust. "I always did think the military wasted more time and money than anything else. Stupid."

"With such a low opinion of the military, it of course makes perfect sense to revolve your life around a tridee show about a military organization," Slair said. "Flawlessly logical."

"Don't remind me," Jenny said. Then she glanced around the strangely barren room. Although the major items of furniture were still there, personal articles had been removed before the ship went in for its overhaul.

Jenny suddenly had a horrible feeling the walls were closing in on her. She spun around and went to the neatly stacked luggage. "I'm going to start unpacking. This place looks too depressing for words."

An hour or so later, she stretched and wiped her hands down the sides of her skirt. "It's amazing what a difference putting things back on the walls makes. It doesn't look like a hotel room anymore."

While she'd been unpacking and rehangng things, Slair had changed from his dress uniform to standard duty uniform and was busy arranging what Jenny referred to, strictly to herself, as 'that damned security blanket desk of his'. Now he looked up from an assortment of tape cartridges. "So I-- Where did that come from?"

Jenny patted the bright statuette she'd just unwrapped. "Randy made it for me."

"What is it?" Slair demanded.

"It's a cat," said Jenny. "I think."

"I trust Semoran does not have his ambitions fixed on becoming a sculptor," said Slair, as he continued to stare at the object. Then he glanced at Jenny, who tried not to look too amused. Slair lifted an eyebrow. "Very well, but put it in the bedroom, not the main cabin."

"Coward," Jenny said. "You just don't want to have to explain why you have a pink-and-red, er, cat sitting on your desk."

She took the figurine into the bedroom and set it carefully on the dressing table, shoving the makeup aside to make room for it. She stepped back and tilted her head to observe the effect.

Then she picked it up again. "One cannot deny that you rather clash with the rest of the decor," she told it severely. As she looked around, wondering where to put the thing, she heard the quiet swish of the main door.

A calm, firm voice said, "Greetings, Commander."

Still holding the figurine, Jenny went back into the main room. "Hello, Tavra," she said. "How was your vacation?"

Tavra stared at her coldly, then turned to Slair. "I still fail to understand why you brought her back," Tavra said in Vulcan. Jenny had rarely heard her sound so plainly irritated. "Why in the name of all that's sensible didn't you leave her on Vakai?"

Jenny glanced quickly at Slair. He'd retreated behind a blank, stony expression. Her hands tightened on the cat figurine, and she edged slowly back toward the bedroom. This looked as if it had all the ingredients required for one of those nasty, icy Vulcan fights, and she didn't want to be anywhere in the vicinity.

Tavra continued with, "That would have kept her peculiar combination of ignorance and information both secure and secured."

"I prefer to have her under my direct control," said Slair flatly, after a strained moment of silence. "As I have already-- Jenny, where do you think you're going? Come back in here."

As Jenny reluctantly approached, Tavra's eyes widened slightly. Jenny wasn't sure whether the Vulcan woman's surprise was caused by the fact that Slair hadn't bothered to switch from Vulcan to Standard, or by the sight of the cat figurine.

As Tavra looked once more at Slair, he shook his head. "No," he said. "She managed to teach herself to understand it, *before* we went on leave."

There was a pause.

"How surprisingly sensible," said Tavra slowly.

Jenny gave her a tight smile. "It seemed like a good idea at the time." There was no need for Slair's cousin to stare at her as if she were a newt that had just learned to talk, damn it.

"She is not necessarily the liability you believe," said Slair. He pulled out the chair and seated himself at the desk.

Looking carefully at Jenny, Tavra said, with a touch of acid in her voice, "If that is your considered opinion, Commander, perhaps you are correct." Her tone changed slightly. "If I may inquire, lady, what are you holding?"

Jenny glanced down at the object in her hands. "Oh. It's a cat. Ran--Semoran made it."

It was one of the few occasions upon which Jenny had the pleasure of seeing Tavra betray real surprise. The Vulcan woman's eyebrows flew upward, and she looked with patent disbelief at the gaudy object.

"Jenny." She looked at Slair, and he nodded toward the bedroom. "Go put that thing away. I want to talk to Tavra."

Jenny correctly took this to mean, 'with you out of earshot, so close the door'. She ducked her head to hide an impossible-to-repress smile. Her facility with their language carried its own set of drawbacks for the Vulcans. *Too damn bad.*

Jenny withdrew into the bedroom, shutting the door without much regret. The conversation would probably be interesting, if you liked arguments, but it was also certain to be acrimonious and unflattering. She'd just as soon miss it. Tavra's opinion of her she already knew.

"That woman would have made a great governess," Jenny informed the cat in her hands. "She must be related somehow to Queen Victoria. Never amused. I wonder if I should be really mean and show her Tekitta's finger-painting, too?"

Deciding against this move, she set the red-and-pink cat on one of the shelves of the wall niche by her side of the bed. She moved back to see how it looked.

"Rotten," she declared cheerfully. She glanced at the door, wondering how long she was supposed to remain tactfully out of sight. Just as she was about to curl up on the bed for the duration, the door slid open. Slair walked in, pulled a cassette case from a partially unpacked box, and walked out again, leaving the door open. He hadn't looked overly grim, either.

Encouraged, Jenny grabbed her current stock of magazines and returned to the main room. Ignoring the two Vulcans, who were now immersed in computer readouts on the viewscreen, she flopped down on the couch, leaning against the pillows and swinging her feet up. She began flipping through what she couldn't seem to stop calling *Imperial Geographic*, deliberately tuning out the others' conversation. This wasn't too difficult to do. She didn't mind the discussions of Slair's family's shipping lines, but she drew the line at technical reports.

She glanced up from her desultory perusal of the magazine to find Tavra eyeing her. Lips tightening, Jenny dropped her gaze back to the page. Tavra didn't have to act quite so annoyed about seeing her again.

*Damn it, I'd rather I'd stayed on Vakai too. The cage is larger and the people are nicer.* Now she was right back to waiting for an escort if she wanted to step outside Slair's rooms.

With that thought, Jenny eyed Tavra's bent head resentfully. *Why can't she look on the bright side of this stupid setup? At least I'm not likely to knife Slair in a fit of pique. Or run off with a junior officer and all of Slair's credit cards, either.*

Tavra looked up from her work again to meet Jenny's angry glare. Jenny automatically flicked her gaze back to her magazine. Then she

lifted her chin and stared back at Tavra. *To hell with you, Tavra. This wasn't MY idea either.*

Tavra appeared somewhat taken aback by Jenny's openly hostile gaze. The Vulcan's dark eyes took on a considering gleam.

"Tavra?" Slair's voice was not quite impatient.

Tavra's attention returned to Slair. "Yes, Commander, as you can see from these figures, we . . ."

Jenny settled back on the cushions and dropped the magazine to her lap. When Slair had informed Tavra that he was bringing Jenny back, rather than hiring a new officer's lady, it must have been a nasty shock for his chief operative.

Jenny directed a snide smile at the ceiling. Tavra had undoubtedly been happily anticipating a nice, peaceful time with a normal officer's lady. A charmer along the lines of Aldith, say. Tavra could have coped with *that* brilliantly.

Then she sighed. Slair wasn't apt to share that little sort-of joke. Something else clicked in her mind. *That's right, he was supposed to incarcerate me planetside. Now why the hell--?* How annoying. She hadn't even thought about it, having fallen into the pattern of following paths of least resistance.

She shrugged. He must be up to something. Either that, or he'd just forgotten about it.

The quiet flow of the Vulcans' conversation drifted past Jenny unnoticed as she turned the focus of her attention inward. In her daydreams now, she played 'going-to-a-con-with-my-friends' in much the same fashion as she'd once constructed elaborate fantasies of star travel and alien exotica. She was deep in a mythical conversation with her best friends, when her attention was caught by the word 'English'.

"--and will certainly be useful when we annex the planet."

"True, though I believe you should not rely too heavily on the possibility," Tavra said. "It would, however, be an asset. Since she will be available in any case--"

"I know I'm going to be sorry I asked, but what will be such an asset?" Jenny said. Surely Slair didn't mean the Empire had run across Earth? A chill spread over her as she realized that it could happen--could already have happened--and she might never know. "Slair, you people haven't found Earth?"

"No," he said. "I have decided it would be of advantage to learn your language."

"You want me to teach you English?" Jenny said blankly.

"Tavra and I. It will not only provide us with an almost unbreakable code, but will almost certainly enable me to obtain one of the more lucrative and powerful positions when the Empire does take your planet."

For some reason, the calm tone of his voice was the last straw. Jenny set aside her magazine with infinite care, pushed herself to the edge of the couch, and slowly rose to her feet, her eyes fixed on Slair.

"I don't believe it," she said in English, her voice brittle. "I do not believe it. After all that 'shut up or speak Standard' for months and months, the man actually expects me to teach him English so he can conquer my home planet more efficiently. This is too much. You must be out of your mind, you complete bastard. Not even to stave off paralyzing boredom--" Her voice had risen, and her hands trembled. She stopped and looked down, then clasped her hands tightly.

Tavra was staring at her with a stony expression. Slair had pushed back his chair and was regarding her with puzzlement. He said, "Please repeat that. In Standard."

"I'm sorry," said Jenny with some bewilderment. "I can't imagine why I should go hysterical at this late date. After all, what else should I expect from you people?"

The Vulcans exchanged glances. Jenny continued, "Of course I'll teach you English, for all the good it'll do you. And don't worry, I won't make up a lot of fake words. I have it on the best authority that I haven't the intelligence for a trick like that. What difference does it make? It won't hurt Earth if I teach you part of one language. What choice have I got, anyway?"

There was a prolonged silence. Tavra glanced at the door, and began to rise.

"No," Slair said. Tavra lowered herself back to her seat. Slair stood and walked over to stand in front of Jenny.

*Oh, dear God,* thought Jenny, appalled at her outburst. *Why did I say all that? I must be crazy--there wasn't any REASON--*

Slair gripped her shoulder with biting fingers and, without a word, propelled her across the cabin into the bedroom. He hit the door control with his free hand. As the door slid shut, he sent Jenny staggering against the bed.

Off-balance, she half-fell onto the bed. Leaning back on her hands, she forced herself to look up at Slair. She couldn't force herself to look stoic. *I don't suppose grovelling would do any real good,* she thought wildly. *How the hell did this get started, anyway?*

Slair remained by the door, his eyes cold yellow. "You need not think I was unaware of your reluctance to leave Vakai. However, if you believe that objectionable behavior will cause me to hold you there rather

than keeping you with me on this ship, you are in error." He took three long strides to the bed, and Jenny shrank back.

"That will not be the result," he stated softly. "You are for my pleasure and my convenience. I choose to have you here. Is that quite clear?"

Jenny managed a shaky nod.

Slair's hand moved toward her, and she jerked away. He stared at her, then took her chin in his hand and forced her head back. "That I do not strike you does not mean I will not. I trust you will bear the possibility in mind."

She stared back at him, trying desperately not to start crying.

"And I feel very sure it would prove effective," he said. He pulled his hand away and walked out of the room. The door slid shut behind him.

After a moment, Jenny sat cautiously upright, eyes fastened on the door, and pressed her hand to her quivering lips. She remained sitting there, trying vainly to figure out what had happened.

*What in the name of God got into you? You know a hell of a lot better than that by now! The shellshocked sensation had worn off, and her eyes were hot and tingling. She put her hands firmly over them. No crying. Not only would it be instantly obvious to Slair, since crying turned her face into a total wreck, but she was afraid she wouldn't be able to stop.*

Hands still over her eyes, Jenny leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees. After that lovely, restful, companionable period on Vakai, it was particularly imbecilic and idiotic to toss away her hard won advances with a fit of hysterics.

*Leaning harder on her hands, she thought bitterly, And I suppose your feeble brain considered it absolutely necessary to pull that scene in front of Tavra, just after Slair'd spent a lot of breath explaining how logical it was to keep me around. She was lucky he hadn't beaten her for that. Thanks a lot, subconscious. Keep this up and you'll get yourself killed.*

Not for the first time, Jenny was conscious of what a fool she'd been to ever have betrayed such fear of physical violence to Slair. He knew very well that the mere threat of what he probably considered minor corrective measures was enough to keep her in line.

*If only I weren't such an appalling coward. Then I'd either stand up for myself like--like Aldith, or I'd figure out some way to run off. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, the saner part snapped tartly, Oh, come off it, Jenny! How? Where? To do what? Become a crime statistic? They probably don't even KEEP crime statistics.*

*And using what for money? This was one of the biggest barriers.*

She hadn't handled any money since she'd left Earth, and had only the haziest idea of the Imperial economy. Maybe she could take the jewelry, but she had no idea how to go about exchanging it for ready cash. She had no money, no defensive skills worth a damn in this culture, and no I.D. Her only identity was as Commander Slair's lady.

If she were ever crazy enough to try it, she'd wind up dead in ten minutes, if she were fortunate. Or Slair would find her in fifteen, in which case she'd undoubtedly wish she *were* dead. Besides, the very thought of deliberately leaving the protective shell of Slair's influence made her feel ill.

"I *can't*," she said. "I'm *afraid*." Now she was in for another nerve-racking period of treading warily around that insensitive bastard's sensibilities.

"Stop that!" she told herself sharply. "Do something. Distract yourself." But calmly proceeding as if nothing had gone wrong was impossible. Her nerves were too taut. "I think I'm quite distracted enough as it is," she said, after raising her head to look around the room.

And they hadn't even been back on the *Victory* for a day. Jenny shook her head, closed her burning eyes, and dropped her head to her hands again. Concentrating on taking slow, even breaths, she deliberately blanked out thought, retreating into a restful half-doze.

Some time later, a hand on her shoulder startled her to full awareness. She jerked away from Slair's touch, then looked up at his closed, impassive face with trepidation.

"Dinner," he said. "Come."

She must have been drifting far longer than she'd thought. Pushing herself off the bed, she silently followed him to the main cabin.

Once seated at the table, she sat poking her food with her fork. This wasn't the first time she'd been grateful Slair preferred to eat in the privacy of his quarters rather than in the officers' dining room. She certainly didn't feel up to being on display at the moment, not in this extremely gloomy state.

Abandoning the fork, Jenny lifted her glass. Swishing the liquid around, she stared at it moodily.

"Is there some purpose to that action?"

Jenny's hand froze. Some of the drink continued over the rim of the glass, spilling onto her fingers. "Oh, shit."

"That is not the type of English I feel it expedient to acquire as a skill," Slair remarked mildly.

"I thought you didn't understand English." Jenny set the glass on

the table and shot a slanting glance at Slair. She decided that Slair wasn't angry with her--much--by this time. If she didn't do anything else stupid, she could get through the evening.

"It requires no great linguistic talent to recognize invective."

"Oh." She began mopping her fingers with the napkin.

Slair eyed her sharply. Then he set his own fork down on his plate. "Why aren't you eating?"

"I'm not very hungry." Jenny pushed her chair back. "Excuse me."

Slair's eyes narrowed, but he made no objection. Jenny stood up, yanked impatiently at the long overskirt of her dress to free it from the base of the chair, and went over to the couch.

There she sat stiffly on the edge, pretending to read the magazine she'd left there earlier. This day was starting to seem endless. *What the devil's the matter with me today, anyway?*

She kept her eyes fixed on the pages until Slair's hand came down on hers. He removed the magazine from her grasp and sat beside her. He clasped her hands securely, pulling her around to face him.

After one almost imperceptible twitch of her hands, Jenny controlled her impulse to pull away, letting her hands rest in his. She only hoped her face didn't look as mistrustful as she felt.

"I must confess to a certain curiosity as to the cause of that outburst today," Slair said. "It was atypical."

She looked at him, her eyes wide.

His hands tightened on hers. "Well?"

"I don't know." She frowned, and shook her head. "Maybe I thought it was just a little tactless--asking me to teach you my language so you can conquer my planet."

"You don't sound very definite."

Jenny shrugged. "I don't see why I bothered to get upset about it. You haven't found Earth. You probably won't, with any luck."

"On the contrary, it's merely a matter of time. Five or ten years, perhaps. One of the exploratory teams is bound to come across the system eventually." The corner of his mouth lifted. "All we need is one of the entertainment programs you've informed me your people so generously broadcast as homing beacons. And as time goes on, finding one becomes more and more likely."

"Damn. Betrayed by THE BEVERLY HILLBILLIES. It serves us right." She bent her head, looking down at their hands.



"However, it is unlikely in the extreme that the *Victory* will be actively involved in the planet's annexation. We are no longer stationed in what I believe to be the proper quadrant."

Jenny's head jerked up. "Then why--"

"Command of one of the planet's primary languages would provide me an incalculable advantage. It's one of the things that speeds up the administrative processes and eases a planet's transition into the Empire. It's always easier for a new planet if we have native help, Jenny. Surely you can see that."

*And I'm the 'native help'. 'I won't!' warred with 'He's right.'*

Slair's voice became thoughtful. "Knowing the language, having you, would make me valuable. I might even maneuver a vice-regal appointment, if all went well."

"Oh. How thrilling for you." Jenny's voice was flat.

Slair looked at her, his eyebrows raised. Then his face relaxed, a half-smile curving his mouth. "And you, Jenny--would you like to be a viceroy's lady?"

She stared at him. His voice was warm, he was almost smiling, and she was supposed to be *pleased*--

A wave of deep anger washed over her. "Why not thirty pieces of silver?" she said viciously, and tried to yank her hands away.

Slair's hands clamped down, trapping hers. His face was hard again. "Jenny? What--"

"Did it ever occur to you that it might not be that easy to conquer Earth?" she said. "We're a nasty, tough species. Not everyone's the incompetent coward I am. I don't think your sample's large enough."

The second she stopped talking, anger deserted her, leaving only apprehension. *That's right, start another scene, about something that may never happen, or not for years.*

She shifted back as far as she could. She and Slair studied each other in silence. Finally his firm grip on her hands relaxed.

"If you seriously believe your world could successfully resist even *one* ship of the Imperial fleet, I may be forced to agree with Tavra's assessment of your intelligence." He paused.

Jenny's mouth wavered into an unwilling smile. Then she compressed her lips to a thin line.

Slair regarded her for a moment, then continued, his tone sardonic, "And for an 'incompetent', you've done very well for yourself."

"Oh, beautifully," she said. "Any halfway decent lead character should have freed the galaxy from Imperial domination by now. Or at least be leading rebel forces. Making noble gestures. Where do I wind up? As somebody's concubine. I'm not even *trying* to do anything."

She tightened her lips again, this time to help hold back tears, and again stared down at their hands.

"I would be willing to pay a great deal for the privilege of watching your efforts in implementing strategy and tactics," Slair said. "As well as fomenting revolution."

"You could probably make a fortune selling tickets," she muttered.

"I should seriously advise you to abandon galactic rabble-rousing as a practical course of action." Then he added, in a mock-speculative tone, "And surely you realize that interfering with the Empire would be violating that particularly idiotic concept, the 'Prime Directive'?"

"Don't!" Jenny said fiercely, pulling her hands from his loosened hold. "I shouldn't *want* to make jokes with you." She didn't quite dare get up and walk away. She twisted away from him.

"I see." He caught her arm and forced her to face him again.

Jenny refused to meet his eyes.

"I said you had done very well for yourself." Slair's voice held no emotion she could define. "In view of the limited options that were open to you, your success is amazing." Then his voice turned cold. "Do you fully understand how exceedingly fortunate you are to be alive?"

Jenny slowly raised her head to meet his hard, controlled look. Her eyes widened as she remembered that this man had originally been planning to kill her. Fortunate indeed.

"Ah, I see that you do." Slair released her arm. "I do not fully comprehend your obvious distress over your continued, and comfortable, existence. Should the feeling persist, however--" He put his fist under her chin and tilted her head back an inch. "Spare me its manifestations."

Numbly, Jenny pushed Slair's hand away. She nodded stiffly and shut her eyes. For the first time in several months, she had an overwhelming longing to be *home*. To walk into her own apartment, fend off two cats who were insisting that they were starving, she never fed them, never-- *and throw everything on the chair, pick up the phone, and call Isabel. After I throw out every piece of STAR TREK junk in the whole damn place.*

"Well?" Slair's voice was sharp. "Jenny, say something."

What she really wanted was someone to hold her and tell her soothing lies, and no one was going to. She took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and said in determinedly cheerful tones, "When I consider that you're

relatively easy to live with-- You're right. I was really lucky. An Imperial sadist could really have had fun with me, couldn't they?"

She tried to smile, failed miserably, and quickly put her hands over her face.

To her infinite astonishment, Slair's arm slid around her, and he swiftly gathered her to rest against him, her head on his shoulder. After the first second of stunned surprise, she tensed, curving away from him.

He tightened his arms. Jenny's resistance vanished. She let herself fall pliantly against the smooth yellow of his uniform tunic, and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"I am not a sadist," said Slair, as Jenny relaxed under the pressure of his arms.

"No." Difficult though it was to believe on occasion. He wouldn't hurt her for pleasure, merely for expediency. Great. Jenny turned her head to hide her face against Slair's shoulder.

Jenny was surprised at how easy it was to slip back into the routine of starship life. The major change was a new and somewhat disturbing freedom. Slair informed her that she need no longer be under constant surveillance every time she left his quarters.

"You mean I don't have to wait for Tavra?" Jenny was both pleased and unsettled by this announcement. She added doubtfully, "But--do I start wearing a knife, or--"

"Absolutely not," Slair said flatly. "No one on this ship will do you serious harm unless they are deliberately attempting to cause trouble."

"Oh." This was not as reassuring as Slair had perhaps intended.

"And I see no further reason to waste an operative's time in that manner. You should be able to manage by yourself by now."

"I guess so," Jenny said, trying to sound convinced. She'd *wanted* to escape that watch, hadn't she? "Slair? That's only here on the ship, isn't it? I mean, I don't have to go by myself on the stations and planet-side stopovers, do I?"

"Are you out of your mind?" said Slair.

No. That was a relief.

There were other minor alterations. Some of the crew had changed, of course, as had some of the non-military personnel. Marudy Tam was



still the chief engineer's lady. Aldith, however, was no longer with Captain len Ronan.

"How nice," Jenny said.

Marudy Tam gave her a superior smile. "You obviously haven't met Hananel yet."

"Who?" Light promptly dawned. "Oh, the captain's new lady?"

"Exactly," said Marudy. "Len Ronan gets bored easily. He hires a new one about every six months, each with a worse temper than the last. You'll have the pleasure of meeting Hananel at the party this evening."

"Fantastic," said Jenny. Just what she needed, a 'meet your new enemy' party. She had also long ago decided that if she never saw Captain Gellis len Ronan again, it would be far, far too soon.

She eyes Marudy Tam uncertainly. Then she decided to make another effort to be friendly. She couldn't spend the rest of her life in Slair's quarters, talking only to him, Tavra, and Tenaya. "Marudy--uh--how was your vacation? What did you do?"

"I kept myself amused," Marudy said, with another smile. Then she gave Jenny a pitying look. "I certainly didn't let myself be tangled into accompanying Nakvi home. How dull was it--deadly or just very?"

"I had a very nice time," Jenny said stiffly.

"Did you?" said Marudy. She eyed Jenny. "Haven't I seen that dress before--several times?"

At this point, Jenny accidentally discovered the key to dealing with Marudy Tam. "I like it," she said coldly, and to her amazement, Marudy laughed.

"Just as well, isn't it?" she told Jenny cheerfully. "Jenny, you don't play cards, do you?"

"Not really." Jenny didn't trust this affability.

"I could teach you, if you'd like. If you have the time to spend playing card games, that is."

"Playing cards or ripping people's reputations to shreds?" Jenny asked.

"Both, of course," Marudy Tam said. "Are you interested?"

Something clicked as Jenny studied Marudy, once again struck by her sable-brown skin so vividly offset by pale hair and eyes. Marudy Tam was probably really a nice, amiable person--as Imperials went. As long as you squelched her firmly once in a while.

"All right, Marudy," Jenny said. She'd never been overly fond of most card and parlor games, but under the circumstances, she was going to give them another chance.

"Good, we can always use another player," Marudy said. "Come down to the lounge, Jenny, and I'll start you on something simple."

"Suitable for simple minds, I hope." As Jenny accompanied Marudy along the corridor, she toyed, very briefly, with the idea of introducing the chief engineer's lady to fizzbin. *No, I do NOT think so. She'd probably slug me once she realized it was a joke.*

As it also turned out, teaching Slair and Tavra English neither left Jenny feeling like a traitor nor instantly lost her the linguistic privacy. The Vulcans lacked the free time and driving incentive that had enabled Jenny to learn Vulcan so rapidly.

It was even rather amusing. Jenny had never before fully appreciated just what a difficult language English could be, with its exceedingly irregular constructions. Slair's young children had regarded it as a game,

but he and his chief operative didn't. It would be a long time before Slair and Tavra were half as fluent in English as she was in Vulcan.

Now that she was no longer under what had amounted to house arrest in Slair's quarters, Jenny found life on the ship much pleasanter. The first real break in the now familiar, slightly dull--with luck--shipboard routine came when the *Victory* put in an appearance for the inauguration of a planetary governor.

"With another one of those tedious receptions, I suppose?" Jenny said. "Doesn't the Imperial military ever do anything but go to parties and write reports?"

"On occasion." Slair looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "For example--"

"It was a joke," she said hastily, cutting him off. Slair had developed a disconcerting tendency to talk almost freely to her in the past month or so. Unfortunately, at least half the times he confided in her, she wished he hadn't.

"Really? In any case, Jenny, no matter how tedious you find these affairs--"

"Yes?" said Jenny, regarding him rather warily. She knew a meaningful pause when she heard one.

"Stay awake."

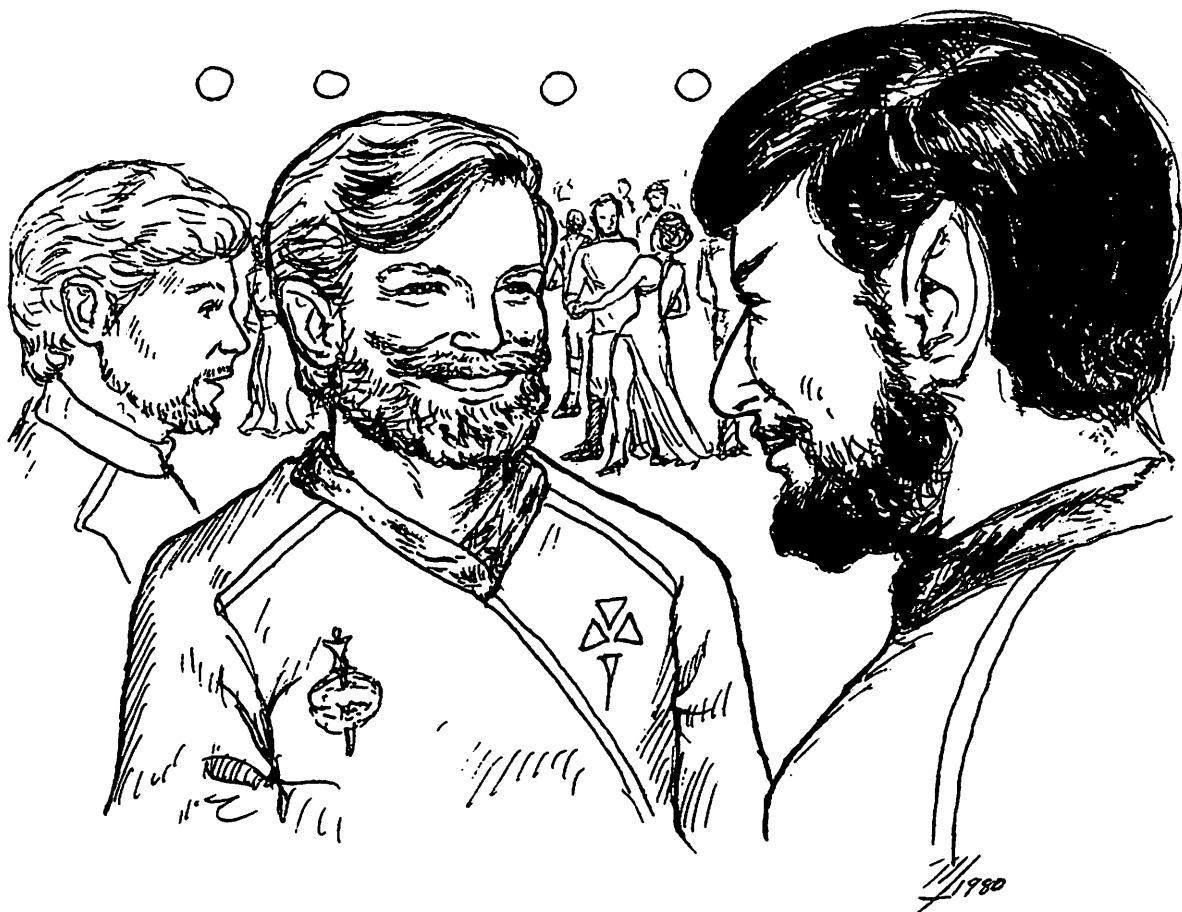
But to Jenny's pleased surprise, this reception was not the dragging bore others had been. She was beginning to reap the rewards of painfully acquired socialization and Corroon's instruction.

In fact, she discovered some time later that she was enjoying herself. What a tremendous difference being able to dance made! It was fun, it was socially acceptable--much more so than standing around the edges chained to Tavra's side--and it was safe.

This was true primarily since she was dancing only with Slair, who could be trusted to cue her through any missed steps. It gave her a comforting sense of security. So did her hair, for a change. As Tenaya had been obliging enough to do it up for her, Jenny felt reasonably sure it wouldn't fall down.

Her dress was another delight. Jenny glanced quickly down as she dipped and turned in the dance, admiring the swirl of sheer layers of flame-red skirt. Considering the random glimpses the shifting fabric revealed, it was a real pity her legs weren't more than--

*Adequate*, she thought with a grin. *Oh, well.*



To set the seal on the evening, Tavra was nowhere in sight. Not laboring under the weight of what Jenny was always sure was total disapproval, even if unspoken, was relief indeed.

As the music ended, Jenny, feeling increasingly smug, swept the top layer of filmy skirt gracefully to one side and sank into a deep curtsy to Slair. "How am I doing?" she asked with a grin.

"Don't try to show off," he said repressively. "That's enough for the moment. Come."

They had not gone more than half a dozen paces from the dance floor when a vibrant voice said, "Slair!"

The speaker was a man in red dress uniform, lieutenant commander's insignia shining on his chest. As tall as Slair, golden blond and tanned, he gave an instant impression of boyish good humor.

"Good to see you again, Chief," he went on. "When I found the *Victory* in orbit--"

"And you, Nourin."

At Slair's tone, Jenny quickly looked from the newcomer to Slair. *My God, he's practically SMILING. I don't believe it. What the hell's going on?*

The blond man grinned. "Yes, despite the best efforts of Fleet Command, behold! I am here!"

"You needn't use that air of innocent surprise," Slair informed him dryly. "I mentioned this stopover in my last tape."

As Slair spoke, it struck Jenny forcibly, for the first time, that Slair didn't really *like* any of the people on the *Victory*. The warmth in his voice when he spoke to this Nourin made that quite clear.

"Crushed by Vulcan logic," Nourin said, his smile widening. Then he tilted his head to survey Jenny carefully. "You must be Jenny." He gave her a slightly-too-flourishing bow. "How charming."

Jenny's instant reaction was that this person was crazy. Then, as she stared at him, his brilliant hazel-green eyes met hers and she knew he wasn't crazy, no matter how strange his behavior, or a boy, no matter how boyish. But who was he, and why was he talking to Slair in that insane fashion?

"Slair?" Jenny said softly.

"Stop posing, Nourin. Jenny, this is Nourin din Alva, my former second-in-command."

"Oh," said Jenny. *When you were a 'dashing raid-leader', Slair? Oh, I see--BOY, do I see why Fleet Command broke up your private little command group.*

"Currently," Nourin added with another flourish, "head of Security, the *Empress Rynea*. At your service."

"Really?" Jenny said with stunned fascination.

Nourin turned back to Slair. "By the way, Chief, you'll be happy to know that little technique you came up with back on Mikula still works like a charm. I used it on a village last week. We had no trouble with the natives after that."

To Jenny's further shock, Slair looked pleased. They'd be slapping each other on the back and chortling any minute, at this rate. *At that point, I quit. Jesus!*

Nourin looked at Jenny again, then at Slair. "I'm only putting in a token appearance tonight. Do you have time to talk--now?"

"Certainly." After a level exchange of glances with Nourin, Slair turned to Jenny. "I'll see you later."



"What?" She'd never been alone at one of these formal affairs before. "But what shall I--"

"I thought you liked dancing," Slair said, with what Jenny considered appalling casualness.

Jenny stared at him. He seemed to mean it, so she reluctantly turned and walked away from the two men.

"So *that's* what all the fuss was about?" Nourin said. "Off a slaver, too--what's the matter, Slair, couldn't you find anyone else willing to take the job?"

At that, Jenny stopped dead and spun around apprehensively. Slair and Nourin were walking off in the other direction. To judge by what she'd caught of the expression on Slair's face, he'd thought that remark was funny. When she considered some of the innocuous remarks to which he'd taken violent exception, this seemed nothing less than amazing.

And now he'd figuratively patted her head and abandoned her. Jenny wandered back to the edge of the dance floor, shaking her head. Nourin was not only the most maddeningly attractive man she'd ever met, but he was certainly-- *A good friend of Slair's. NOW I remember; Kitty said he'd taken them to the ZOO. Good grief. That explains a lot.*

After a few minutes of watching the dancing wistfully, Jenny jumped slightly when a man in rich civilian dress spoke to her. "Dance?" she said uncertainly. "Me? I--I'd love to," she finished firmly. After all, what could possibly go wrong in the middle of an eight-person pavane?

*Nothing*, she decided after she'd gotten through one set without forgetting any of the steps. This was easy. To be on the safe side, she'd just make damn sure she didn't get caught in any single-pair dances.

*No waltzes*, she thought, as she blithely started on the next set with her partner, who'd actually asked her to dance *again*. *I haven't been approved by the Patronesses. Hey, Tavra'd make a great Mrs. Drummond-Burrell--* Jenny hurriedly turned before she lost track of her steps.

As she did so, she caught sight of Slair and Nourin, deep in conversation at the end of the ballroom. *As long as we're on a Heyer plane, how about Slair as--as Byron? Dark, brooding--do you suppose I dare hope he's got a dreadful secret in his past?* Jenny choked back laughter and cast another sidelong glance at Slair. He and Nourin probably wished they were off doing something useful and amusing, such as sacking a city.

In spite of her efforts, a slightly malicious grin lit her face as she whirled back, holding her hand out to her partner. Smile and enjoyment rapidly vanished as his hand pressed hers. She found him eyeing her with calculation.

Jenny controlled her impulse to jerk her hand away. *Honestly, these people!* Back on Earth, she'd have had no hesitation in discouraging this sort of thing with an icy glare, or in excusing herself and walking off.

However, with Imperials you never knew; there was always the lurking possibility they'd jump at you with a knife.

The man shifted his hand on hers. Jenny sent a pleading look in Slair's direction, willing him to see it and translate it accurately as 'Get me out of this'.

Her partner's fingers slid lingeringly over hers, and then her hand was freed as they turned in the measured figures of the dance.

*Oh, shit*, Jenny thought wearily. Slair hadn't seen her, of course. Now she was stuck with finishing out the dance and shaking this character without offending him too badly. None of these people ever seemed to consider 'no' an answer. This would teach her-- Turn completed, she held out her hand again with resignation.

The hand that closed over hers was Slair's.

"That is, I think, quite sufficient, Jenny." Slair's voice was icy, and the look he gave her dance partner was far from friendly.

The man eyed Slair for a second. Then he shrugged and bowed pointedly to Jenny. "Perhaps another time," he suggested.

Now securely under Slair's eye, Jenny swept the man a curtsy and smiled politely before Slair led her away.

He escorted her to the edge of the dance floor. "What happened?"

Jenny looked back at the dancers and noted curious attention focused on Slair and herself. "Well, actually--not much." Her mouth twisted in a wry smile. "He made a very mild advance and I overreacted. I'm sorry. But thank you for rescuing me. These people make me nervous."

"I see," Slair responded. "Other than that, are you enjoying yourself this time?"

Jenny nodded. "Bless Corroon and those dancing lessons. I'm sorry to drag you away from your friend Nourin. Shall I go tactfully away again?"

Slair shook his head. "He was only here briefly, in any case."

To see Slair? It certainly sounded like it. Now that they were standing still, Jenny realized just how much her feet were starting to ache. "Slair, I've got to sit down. My feet hurt."

The corner of his mouth curved up as he studied her. "Come, then."

Jenny accompanied him through the crowded ballroom and down a hallway to a small room. It was dimly lit and thickly carpeted. The contrast between the brilliant function rooms and this cozy darkness nearly blinded her.

"Shit!" she said as her leg made violent contact with something hard.

A second later the lights flared to a normal level. Jenny rubbed her thigh. "Of all the stupid places to put a table--" She subjected the offending object to a malevolent scrutiny. "That's one of the ugliest things I've ever seen. All those writhing--"

"I'm glad you like it," Slair said.

Jenny glanced around and then collapsed thankfully on the wide, thick-padded bench. "I didn't know how tired I was. And I bet I know what *these* rooms are for. This thing's practically a bed."

"How perceptive of you." Slair moved across the room to the full-length window open on the starlit gardens.

"That candy," Jenny observed, after a look at the bowl on the low table, "is probably poisoned."

"I doubt it," said Slair.

"Fattening, anyway." Jenny pushed aside layers of skirt to look at her thigh. "And another great bruise. Fantastic. With all these slit skirts, too."

"It will serve to add--what is that phrase you like so much?"

"'Artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative'," she responded. She had long ago discovered, to her great joy, that W.S. Gilbert's razor-edged wit translated beautifully into Imperial Standard. "Add it to what, Slair?"

There was a rare, real smile on Slair's face. "Considering that I ordered you off the floor in the middle of a dance, merely because you smiled upon your partner--"

"Do you mean to tell me," Jenny said, "that they think you're *jealous*?"

"A reasonably enough assumption on their part."

Jenny made a strangled noise and started to laugh. Still laughing, she bent forward to pry off her flimsy shoes. She shook her head, and rubbed her aching arches. "You have no idea how much my feet hurt."

"If you were still content to observe from the sidelines, in your former subdued manner, these problems would not arise," Slair pointed out without sympathy.

"That's not a very helpful observation. I *like* dancing."

"It was not intended to be helpful," Slair said. "As for--"

Jenny glared at him. "You've got a worse sense of humor than I do."

Slair turned back to the window. "I see no need for you to become gratuitously insulting."

"Gratuitously?" she said skeptically.

Slair did not respond. Jenny watched him thoughtfully as he stared out at the gardens. Was he or was he not in a good enough mood to ask him about that Nourin character? *Absolutely fascinating. A blond, Imperial stand-in for Simon Templar. I'd sure hate to be anyone opposing Slair and that second of his.*

Struck with his absorption with the view out the window, Jenny shelved the intriguing topic of Nourin, asking instead, "What's so interesting out there?"

"Perhaps nothing." Slair faced her. "If you are fully recovered--"

"Fully recovered? I just sat down! I'm not made of iron." She considered, and added, "Well, actually, I am, but--"

Slair held up his hand, half-turning back to the window. "Quiet!"

"What--?"

"Silence," he said, his voice low. He moved to the side of the window.

Jenny listened. She could hear nothing, and debated the advantage of joining Slair to see what was going on. That meant standing, of course, and it probably wouldn't be worth it anyway. Then a barely-audible murmur of conversation reached her ears. A glance at Slair's intent face made it clear that *he* was having no difficulty following the discussion, whatever it was. The volume of the conversation also seemed to be slowly increasing.

Slair was at her side in a few long, silent strides. "Their damper is defective and they'll discover that very shortly."

Even as he spoke, the conversation abruptly hit a more normal volume. Jenny still couldn't quite catch it, but she did distinctly hear a sharp voice say, "Shut up! Can't you hear? The damper's cut out!"

"That did it." Slair pulled Jenny to her feet. "Come, Jenny. We have a limited amount of time."

Jenny snatched up her shoes and ran after him. "Slair, what did you hear?"

"Not enough and too much. Those fools will want no witnesses to that. These are the first rooms they'll check." His hand was on the door. "And our exit was no secret."

"Wait a minute," said Jenny urgently. Her brain seemed to have shifted into fear-induced overdrive. That *Slair* thought this situation dangerous was enough to frighten her without any other evidence. "You mean they'll come looking for you if they think you overheard them?" No way to hide their presence, none of Slair's operatives near. Out of the main rooms, so no hidden guards--

"Shut up and come on." He gave her one swift glance. "If it does come to a fight, make sure you stay out of my way, Jenny."

"No, wait! They'll *know* we were here. You just said they would! So--so we should make it *obvious*. We--we were here but didn't overhear them because we were otherwise occupied?" Jenny flung away her shoes and grabbed Slair's hands. This at least kept her fingers from shaking too badly. There was something very final about that calm instruction of his, and she knew where she'd wind up if she were caught in the middle of a fight.

"Slair--if we pretend we're making mad, passionate--act romantic! You'll look like a fool, but that's better than--"

"An idea somewhat lacking in conviction," he said dryly.

"It always works in books," Jenny said in desperation.

"Possibly," Slair said. "However--" He studied her intently for a split-second, then pulled his hands from her tight grasp. He swiftly drew his knife, placed it in her hand, and closed her fingers over the hilt. "It is generally thought that you have a violent temper."

"What?"

"Prove it!" he said loudly. He lowered his voice to say, "We'll attract their attention. It'll be more effective than waiting for them to walk in."

Jenny looked about wildly, then dashed back to snatch up the candy dish from the low table. She hurled it at the open window. There was a satisfying smash as the dish landed on the stone walkway.

"I'll dance with anyone I like!" Jenny looked hopefully to Slair.

He strode over, gripped her shoulders, and shook her, saying in Vulcan, "You're supposed to be furious, not terrified. Be insulting. And don't drop that knife!" Switching back to Standard, he snapped, "You'll do as I say!"

Jenny twisted out of his hands, casting a glance over his shoulder as she did so. There were ominous figures at the window. "I'll do as I please!" she said, her voice not sounding nearly as loud as the blood pounding in her ears. This wasn't going to work-- She edged back toward the door, holding Slair's knife at what she devoutly hoped was a business-like angle.

Slair's hand pounced on hers. He plucked the knife from her fingers and swung her around so that she could no longer see the window. "Try pulling a knife on me just once more and I'll take your skin off in strips," he snarled.

"That does it!" Jenny snapped beyond perfectly normal fear into what a small, dispassionate part of her mind calmly knew was an adrenaline high. For this moment, she was actually enjoying the chance to scream at someone. "I quit! I'm leaving! I'm going home if I have to walk every step of the way! I won't put up with this for another--"

"You'll put up with whatever I tell you to." Slair's voice was almost as loud as hers.

"I won't! I'm going--"

Slair grabbed her arm and yanked her toward him. His gaze flicked past her, reminding her of their audience. "You're going nowhere. The only way you'll get passage home *will* be on foot. If you think I'm going to pay for all of your tantrums--"

"I wouldn't expect you to pay for anything!" Jenny ruthlessly plagiarized some of the other officer's ladies' complaints for her own use. "You're too cheap. And too insanely jealous, and--and--"

"Well?" Slair snapped.

Jenny switched to urgent Vulcan. "Slair, I'm running out of things to say!"

"Tell me I'm cheap again," he responded in the same language, his tone menacing. "Use your imagination. Hit me."

Jenny hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Too cheap to buy me anything but this horrible, rotten junk! Let me go, you--you--"

Totally at a loss for a suitable insult, she tried to yank the jewelled band from her neck to fling it at him in a truly theatrical gesture. The necklet held, her effort only digging the edges into her throat and fingers.

"Damn!" she said, shaking her hand.

"Cease these stalling melodramatics." Slair glanced past her again and switched back to Vulcan. "I said hit me--or try."

She stared at him and took a deep breath. "All right, Commander," she said in English. "You asked for it." She drew back her arm and slammed her hand across the side of his face.

She felt the impact up hand and arm to her shoulder. Slair showed no sign he'd even noticed the blow, but gave her a vicious-looking shove. Already jarred by the reflected force of the slap she'd dealt him, Jenny

was carried too far backward by the moderate force, tripped on her skirt, and wound up sprawled on the floor.

Slair stepped over to plant himself in front of her. "Get up." His voice was frozen. "We're leaving--now!"

"I refuse to go with you!" Jenny told him in a voice she later decided must have been heard all the way to Earth. "Not one step!" Her hand bumped into something that turned out to be one of her shoes. What it was doing over here was beyond her, but it inspired her. In another dramatic outburst, she threw the shoe in Slair's direction.

It missed him completely, of course. Slair ignored the missile, staring past Jenny.

She twisted around as if following his gaze. She was practically at the feet of four men. The three in civilian garb appeared mesmerized. The fourth, in Starfleet dress uniform, merely looked stunned.

Jenny opened her eyes very wide and put a hand to her lips. "Oh, dear," she said in a die-away tone.

"Don't overdo it!" Slair snapped in Vulcan. He moved toward her to bend and yank her roughly to her feet, sending her stumbling a step or two away from the window. His eyes never left the men standing there.

There was a long, tense pause, during which Slair's hand tightened ostentatiously on the hilt of his knife. When he spoke, it was in a voice of icy fury. "I do not recall requesting your presence."

The men exchanged glances. "Commander--" began the officer.

Slair took one controlled, stalking pace toward them.

"Your pardon, sir," one of the men said tentatively. One of his companions shot a quick glance from Slair to Jenny and began to look amused. Slair stared at him and the dawning grin vanished.

"I am not interested in your feeble excuses for this intrusion." Without taking his eyes from the four men, Slair began tapping the shining blade of his knife lightly on the palm of his hand. "Get out."

The four men didn't move. Slair's knife slowed, stopped. "Now," he said.

Frozen stillness. Jenny held her breath. This was the critical point, and she was painfully sure this colossal, crazy bluff was about to fail. Nobody in their right mind would fall for anything so stupid--

There was a tap on the door, and it was immediately opened. "Your pardon for this intrusion, Commander," Tavra said, pausing just inside the doorway, "but--"





The dangerous tension in the room snapped. Jenny thought she was going to fall down in sheer overwhelming relief at the sound of Tavra's assured voice.

Slair whirled around. "What are you doing here? Get out!"

"I'm sorry, Commander." Tavra remained planted firmly in the doorway. "But it is important--"

"I'll attend to it--and you--later, whatever it is," Slair said. "Your judgment is slipping. Now--" He turned back to the four at the window. "I said, 'Leave'. I will not repeat it."

There was still a chance the men might try something. But Tavra was standing in the open door--and her entrance had drastically altered the odds. The men might dare four-to-one against Slair, but Jenny didn't think they were likely to favor the idea of taking on *two* Vulcans.

She was right. After the briefest of hesitations, and another lightening exchange of glances, the four men seemed to fade, disappearing quietly back into the garden's darkness.

Slair promptly slammed the long window shut and yanked the heavy curtain across it. As he did so, Tavra stepped fully into the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

"That should do it," Slair said in a low voice. "Tavra, make sure everyone's alerted for possible trouble when we leave."

Tavra nodded. "Do you think it likely?"

Slair shrugged one shoulder. Jenny found she'd recovered the ability to move and speak. "Tavra," she said in heartfelt tones, "I have never been so glad to see anyone in my entire life. How-- How very lucky," she finished slowly. "What absolutely incredible timing."

Incredible was the word for it, all right. A piece of *deus ex machina* that would turn Zeus green with envy, in fact.

"Now, really, Jenny," said Slair, as he moved away from the window.

"It *wasn't* luck, *was* it?" Jenny said. "But you're not carrying a communicator. How--?"

Slair held up his right hand. The heavy ring he always wore flashed gold. He touched the deep red stone lightly with his thumb.

The expression of calm superiority on his face was the last straw. Jenny was suddenly as angry now as she'd been afraid before. "Do you mean to tell me you let me go through all that and--and get scared to death, and you knew all along Tavra was going to walk in? Of all the--"

"And if she had not been able to reach us in time?" Slair asked.

Jenny shot a look at Tavra, whose expression was utterly noncommittal. "Oh." Turning back to Slair, she said, "Well, you didn't have to frighten me like that, damn it! You might have told me she was coming."

"I knew that I had summoned her," Slair said, "not that she was able to respond."

"Oh," said Jenny again.

"And there was quite enough strain placed on your limited powers of dissimulation as it was," he added, with an upward curve of the corner of his mouth.

His expression made Jenny wish hotly that she'd hit him twice as hard when she'd had the chance.

"Don't try it," said Slair. His voice was amused, but held a sharp note of warning.

It jolted Jenny from rising anger to find her hands clenched. She quickly relaxed them. *God, I must be going out of my mind!*

"Commander?" said Tavra. "Back to the main rooms?"

"Before Jenny and I finish the violent disagreement we so carefully staged?" Slair said. "I see no need to provide further cause for suspicion. It will also take Jenny time to make herself fit to be seen."

Jenny put an unsteady hand to the hair tumbling down her back. The adrenaline-engendered euphoria gone, shaky reaction was setting in. Sanity had returned as well, and her smarting hand was an unpleasant reminder that Slair might have something to say later about that little slap. He'd told her to pretend to hit him, not try to knock his head off.

She began making a feeble effort to bring her hair back to order. After watching her for a minute, Slair said, "Tavra, see what you can do. She's only making it worse."

Jenny let her hair fall. "I'd like to see *you* try it without a brush or comb." One more comment from him and she was going to do something stupid, like start crying.

Both Vulcans ignored her remark. After surveying Jenny, Tavra produced a comb from the flaring top of one of her tall boots.

"You would," Jenny muttered in English.

After what Slair considered an appropriate interval, they returned to the crowded main ballroom. Other than a certain air of taut watchfulness, neither he nor Tavra appeared in the least concerned. This was more than Jenny could say for herself.

All other considerations aside, she was uncomfortably aware of being the object of unwanted attention. She had the strangest feeling that everyone in the room had already heard about the 'fight'.

As if that weren't enough, her hair was also gaining her sidelong glances and outright amused stares. Since Tavra was no hairdresser either, they'd had to settle for dragging the comb through it, simply anchoring part of it with Jenny's hair ornament and letting the rest hang down her back.

Jenny'd never felt so conspicuous in her life. By now, she was sure her cheeks were as red as her dress. However, embarrassment was not nearly so stimulating an emotion as fear or anger, so she was now also desperately tired.

Once well into the ballroom, Slair held out his hand. "Come, Jenny." He nodded in the direction of the dance floor.

"Aren't we leaving?" said Jenny, without much hope.

"We are not. When you are not dancing with me, you will remain with Tavra. Is that clear?"

Jenny nodded. "I don't think I remember any of the steps at the moment, though." She was only half-joking.

"I suggest you try," Slair told her. His hand was still held out in silent command.

So she was to spend the rest of the evening with everyone staring at her. Until they left, when they'd have the hilarious fun of discovering whether those four conspirators had decided to try killing them or not. Fantastic. Hoping she didn't look as upset as she felt, Jenny set her mouth firmly and placed her hand on Slair's.

"Slair?" Jenny said diffidently much later that night.

"Yes?" he said, as he knotted the sash of his blue robe.

Jenny stopped her slow progress down the small buttons that closed the long, tight sleeves of her dress and shaped oval openings from wrist to shoulder. "I--didn't mean to hit you that hard."

"Didn't you?" he asked, walking over to her. "Do you need help with that?"

Jenny nodded silently. Beautiful though it was, she couldn't deny that her favorite dress was just a trifle difficult to get on and off without assistance. There was silence as he worked his way down the buttons of one sleeve. She stared fixedly at his hands.

As he began on the other sleeve, Jenny said with grim determination, "I--I hope I didn't hurt you."

"No." There was a brief pause. "Disappointed?"

Jenny jerked her head up in time to catch a flash of half-smile. An answering smile tugged at her mouth. "Frankly, Slair--I'm not sure."

"Really?" he said, as he finished unbuttoning the dress and stepped back. "I am."

That was the last she heard of it from Slair--aside from an unkind comment on her aim. Nor did she ever hear anything more about the four conspirators who'd so thoroughly ruined a perfectly good evening. Slair had flatly refused to tell her another word about it, and Jenny resigned herself to the fact that she'd probably never have the slightest idea what had been going on. Slair held the firm opinion that there were Some Things Fan Was Not Meant To Know.

For the following week or so, however, she heard far more than she cared to about her 'fight' with Slair. As she'd long ago discovered, the Starfleet grapevine made warpdrive look sluggish by comparison.

Then that was old news, driven out by new scandal, and Jenny's life became tranquil once more. By now, Tenaya had become the closest thing to a friend Jenny had. Furthermore, Marudy Tam wasn't totally unbearable, and Jenny could put up with the other officer's ladies, provided she didn't have to deal with Ien Ronan's latest acquisition.

More important, she and Slair had finally settled into something approximating a reasonable relationship.

*About time, too, she thought sleepily one night. It's been a year, after all.*

"Good grief!" she said, suddenly fully awake. Yes, no matter how she calculated, it came out to a year at the least. If any of her computations had ever been correct, and judging by the length of her hair, it had probably been over a year on Earth.

*Over a year. I must be twenty-seven by now. I don't even have a birthday any more. Everyone at home must think I'm dead, by this time-- Oh, Jenny, you know they probably think you drowned. You were dead to them a long time ago. . . .*

"What's the matter, Jenny?" said Slair.

"Nothing," she said. Pressing closer to him, she added lightly, "Now I see why trekkers all wanted a Vulcan of their very own. It's so nice when you've got cramps. Better than Midol."

"Go to sick bay in the morning, then," he told her. "I don't care whether you like the doctor or not."

"Sure," Jenny said, almost asleep. "It's still nice, though. . . ."

From what she could gather, Jenny thought the *Victory* was now stationed halfway across the Empire from its last tour of duty. This sector was far less settled. There were fewer diplomatic duties and more real exploration. This gave Jenny even less to do. Slair seemed to enjoy it, though. He liked missions rather than the reports the captain saddled him with.

*Gives him a nice chance to get off the ship and away from the captain,* Jenny thought, watching Slair slide an extra dagger into a sheath in his boot. Captain len Ronan would shuttle down in the same landing party as his third officer about the same time she turned into a mongoose.

"Have a good time," she said. She wanted to add, 'And for God's sake, be careful'. They'd eaten dinner in the officers' dining room last night, and she hadn't liked the expression on len Ronan's face when he'd looked in their direction. The captain wouldn't make any overt move against Slair, but an accident . . . what better place than a reconnaissance mission. . . .

"I shall," Slair said. He walked over to where she sat on the bed and put his hand under her chin. His faintly cheerful expression faded. "What is it, Jenny?"

She shoved the nagging worry to the back of her mind. Slair had been an Imperial officer longer than she'd been alive. He needed no stupid warnings from her. "Have a good time," she repeated. "Slair? If you spend this trip lining up the natives and shooting every other one until they stop fighting, would you mind *not* telling me this time?"

"Very well," he said, his face once more subtly amused. Tilting her head further back, he bent and kissed her lightly.

When the main door closed behind him moments later, Jenny remained seated on the bed. If Slair and Tavra were both off planetside, Tenaya should be free, even at this hour. Jenny reached for the bedside communicator. She was lucky. "Tenaya? Look, if you're free, I think I remember the rest of the rules for that game I was showing you."

Tenaya'd really taken to poker. What with the rules Jenny recalled of the only card game she'd ever really liked, and the rules she and Tenaya had invented to cover gaps, they should be able to spring it on the unsuspecting populace any day now. Jenny couldn't do anything with it herself, of course, but she maliciously hoped Tanaya would bankrupt the rest of the crew.

† †                      † †                      † †

For the third morning in a row, Jenny woke early. This was incredibly annoying. Here on the ship, she normally slept as late as she pleased. Every situation had *some* compensations.

She rubbed her eyes and rolled to look at the clock. A glance at the time made her groan. "What an appalling time of the day. Yuck." She sighed heavily, threw back the coverlet, and stood up. She padded groggily to the bathroom, where she splashed cold water on her face. Then she surveyed her reflection with distaste.

"What on earth are you doing up at this hour?" she asked herself crossly. She shook her head and went back to bed.

Still tired, she couldn't seem to fall into sleep again. Sleeping alone was odd and rather lonely after sharing Slair's bed for so long.

What she really missed when he was gone was the weight of his arm across her. Ever since she'd been privileged to work out in the free-fall gym . . . Her subconscious had retaliated by providing a charming selection of falling nightmares. After a couple of restless nights, Slair had solved the problem by resting his arm over her. It gave the needed feeling of solid security and had long since become habit.

Several hours later, Jenny woke again, this time having slept far too long. As usual, she decided to forget about breakfast, since it was almost time for lunch.

She sat in the middle of the broad bed, running a brush through her long hair with lazy strokes. She couldn't think of a damn thing she felt much like doing. "Let's see . . . " Half-closing her eyes, she timed her words to the strokes of the brush.

"Tenaya's busy. I'm tired of studying. I'm tired of reading. I can't draw." While Marudy Tam had said something about playing cards today, Jenny didn't feel like making the effort necessary to cope with it. Marudy was all right, now that Jenny knew how to handle her. But the so-dear captain's lady would be there too, and Hananel was at least twice the vicious bitch Aldith had been.

Maybe she should dig out her needlework again. For a while, she'd had high hopes for that as a time-filler. However, after listening to her swearing at her embroidery, Slair had forbidden her to pick up a needle and thread. "And furthermore," he had said, "I see no particular need for a bloodspotted pillow cover."

Jenny checked the time again. "The hell with it." She tossed the brush up and let it fall to the bed. "I'm going swimming."

After swimming laps until she was dead-tired, Jenny felt a good deal less restless. Sometimes there was just no substitute for good, basic physical fatigue. In fact, by now she was in much better shape than she'd ever been on Earth, with no need for periodic attempts to crash diet off five or ten excess pounds. Of course, she'd never done nearly as much exercise then.

Leaving the changing room, Jenny headed down the short hallway leading to the main corridor. A blue-uniformed officer was near the door. She eyed him just long enough to prove she'd noticed him and then ignored him, angling to avoid him.

*Maybe I WILL go talk to Marudy. Even if she does cheat at--* Jenny came to an abrupt halt as the officer suddenly moved, stepping toward her to bar her way with an outstretched arm.

"Hello," he drawled.

Jenny instantly stepped backward. "What do you want?" Her voice was polite but wary.

He eyed her appraisingly, a slow smile spreading on his face. A senior lieutenant, from his insignia. Tall, young, handsome--one of the many gorgeous racial mixes the Empire produced so frequently. Clean-shaven, too--daringly faddish.

His silent study gave Jenny a strong desire to cover herself with a burnoose and then slam that expression from his face. She took another step back and turned away. She'd just go back to the women's changing room until this hotshot lieutenant left.

"Don't be in such a hurry." He moved forward and closed his hand on her arm.

Jenny jerked as if burned. When his fingers only tightened, she stared at him. She didn't recall ever seeing him before, but he *had* to know who she was.

"Are you out of your mind?" she said breathlessly. "I'm--"

He laughed. "You're Commander Slair's pet cat. I know all about you."

"Let go of me." Jenny wrenched out of his grasp, angry and alarmed. Why hadn't her accustomed talisman worked? "I don't think Commander Slair would approve."

"He's planetside for the next few days, remember?" he said with amusement. "So's that guard-bitch of his."

"So what?" she said as rudely as possible. With that, she spun around to head for the changing room.

Another long stride and he was beside her again. A graceful side-step brought him in front of her, forcing her to stop once more. His smiled widened. "So you can relax."

Far from relaxed, Jenny cast a hopeful glance down the hallway. There was, of course, no sign of any of the four hundred-and-something people who lived on this ship. The lieutenant looked as if he awaited an answer, and she said, "So?" for lack of anything else coming to mind.

"So . . . a little mutually rewarding--conversation." Putting a hand on his dagger, he gave her a very small bow, and informed her graciously, "Ellion R'elek, at your service."

"I'll just bet," Jenny said in English. In Imperial Standard, she added, "In that case, you can just let me by."

"Oh, come now. Nobody's here." He rested his hands on the gold sash at his waist and favored her with another careful scrutiny, then laughed. "It can't be very enjoyable for a woman of your inclinations--spending your time chained to one of those walking freezer units."

Jenny looked at Ellion R'elek blankly for a second. *Inclinations? What-- Oh, God, yes, that fake-fight a couple of weeks ago. Remember all those lurid stories you got from Tenaya and Marudy Tam?* She put a hand over her mouth to hide a grin.

"Boy, do you have the wrong idea," she told him in English.

Lieutenant R'elek reached out to tap her waist. "Don't be coy," he said as she recoiled from his touch. "It doesn't suit you. I know how closely he has you watched. Anyone with eyes can see he won't let you wear a knife. What'd you do?" he asked curiously. "Pull it on him once too often?"

A mental image of her trying to take out Slair with any weapon short of a submachine gun made Jenny choke back slightly hysterical laughter. This time, she didn't entirely succeed in keeping the grin off her face.

This was unfortunate, since Lieutenant R'elek grinned back and moved closer. "You're being wasted on that Vulcan, Jenny--"

She stiffened, with an odd dislike at his use of her name.

"--and if he holds you so tightly, there must be something that makes it worth his while. But is it worth yours?"

"What?" she said.

"You could be extremely useful to a man on his way up," Ellion suggested. "Slair's a successful man. Study of his--methods, shall we say?--would be valuable."

Jenny shook her head slightly, a rueful smile tugging at her mouth. This was getting, quite unintentionally, funnier by the sentence. "Lieutenant--"

"You can call me Ellion," he told her.

"And you can call *me* Miss Marlowe," Jenny informed him in English. She continued in Standard, "I doubt, and I mean this sincerely, that I could do you one bit of good."



He looked down at her sharply. "*I'm* a generous man, and not overly possessive. It might make a pleasant change for you, Jenny."

*You're also a damn fool*, Jenny thought. Surely no one in their right mind would throw over a sure protector like Slair for a rising hotshot like this turkey?

"Well, Commander Slair *is* overly possessive," she stated firmly. "I feel he would also object vigorously if I started retailing state secrets for a moderate fee--" She stopped and shook her head. "You may be willing to risk that. I'm not. Thank you and goodbye."

Lieutenant R'elek didn't move. "No gain without risk. With the proper backing, you might still be third officer's lady. To an officer who knows how to be openhanded. I can assure you I'd be more entertaining than--"

"No," said Jenny.

He cocked his head to one side and smiled down at her. "I could change your mind, Jenny."

The phrase echoed oddly. *I've heard that before--* She shook her head again. "I hate to be rude, but you're crazy, Lieutenant. And Slair would kill me."

"But he isn't here at the moment," R'elek pointed out. He would have put his hand under her chin, but she pulled away. "His chief operative isn't here. When the cat's away . . ."

His words trailed off suggestively. Jenny looked at him and then burst into laughter.

"This is ridiculous," she gasped in English. "I can't *stand* any more replays of that stupid episode!"

Her laughter ceased abruptly as R'elek's hand thrust her back to the wall. His mouth was compressed to a thin line. No particular perception was required to tell he was furious.

"As I said, the commander isn't here now." Lieutenant R'elek's hand dropped to the hilt of his dagger. "If you want to play risky games, lady, I may give you more than you bargained for."

With an effort, Jenny kept her eyes on his face rather than his hands and knife. Why she'd ever wished for freedom from Slair's guardian operatives was beyond her at the moment. But the paralyzing terror she expected didn't come. Fear, yes, but not sheer panic. In fact, she had an exasperated impulse to try to slap this obnoxious character, or kick him severely on the kneecap.

This was obviously insane, so instead she shot a glance at the door to the main corridor. "I don't think we need an audience." She gave R'elek a small smile, sure it was totally unconvincing.

He stared at her with narrowed eyes for a fraction of a second, then let his dagger slip back the inch he'd pulled it from its sheath. "All right, hellcat," he said. "This isn't really the place for a serious business discussion. But think about it."

He stalked off down the hallway toward the gym just as two of the *Victory's* few female officers entered the hall from the main corridor.

*I'll be damned. There WAS someone coming.* She'd been afraid no one would come to use the gym for the next three hours. She must be living right.

Breathing a heartfelt sigh of relief, Jenny walked quickly to the main corridor. At the door, she glanced back. Lieutenant R'elek stood at the far end of the hallway, watching her. She continued hastily into the corridor, hoping he wouldn't get the bright idea of following her, at least not before she had a chance to get to the turbolift.

"Well, if it isn't our antisocial--"

Jenny whirled around. "Marudy Tam!" Her voice was so warm the chief engineer's lady regarded her with suspicion. Jenny didn't care. She smiled, less at Marudy than as a general expression of gratitude to the universe.

After a probing look, Marudy Tam smiled back. "Stopped sulking, I see. Finally. Jenny, would you like to play--"

It was Jenny's turn to look suspicious. "Who else will be there?"

"Hananel's otherwise occupied this afternoon." Marudy Tam's pale golden eyes gleamed with malicious amusement.

Jenny decided not to ask. There were some things it was better not to know. . . . In that case, she might as well accompany Marudy Tam. Jenny's glance slid back to the gym area. An afternoon's penance losing card games was a small price to pay for getting out of that awkward scene with Lieutenant Ellion R'elek so easily.

Jenny closed her book, stretched, and decided she might as well take a shower. After pinning her hair in an untidy mass on top of her head, she began working on the fastening at the shoulder of her loose, open-sided light robe. At the bathroom door, she paused, struggling with the recalcitrant clasps.

Abandoning the effort, she gathered the hem in her hands to simply pull the robe off over her head. Before she could do so, she caught the soft swish of the main door and heard a sharply questioning, "Jenny?" from the outer room.

A delighted smile lit her face and she ran to the bedroom door. "Slair!"

Slair stood by his desk. He wore the taut expression that usually signalled intense irritation. Jenny's smile faded. She hesitated, that fleeting impulse to run and hug him gone. She remained in the doorway, eyeing him carefully.

For a moment that was far too long and uncomfortable, he stared at her. Then he crossed the room in a few long strides and gripped her wrist tightly. "Jenny," he said again, in a completely different tone, and pulled her close.

Jenny wrapped her arms around him and leaned her head on his uniformed shoulder.

Slair's arms tightened around her. Then his hands slid up the curve of her back and up her neck to her hair. He twisted his fingers in the insecurely-piled strands and pulled her head sharply back. Placing his mouth on hers, he pressed her lips almost painfully, holding her head pinioned between his hands and mouth.

Jenny was almost relieved when he released her. "Welcome back," she said, rather shakily. At least the man no longer looked as if he wanted to hit something. "How was the expedition?"

"Moderately profitable--perhaps." Slair drew his fingers through her hair, loosening the remaining pins. He wrapped a strand of hair around his hand and gave a light tug. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Haven't you learned to put it up properly yet?"

Jenny responded to his flash of smile with a buoyant grin. "I was just about to take a shower. Do you want it first? Or we could share it."

Slair pulled his hand free with another tug on her hair. "Saving water is always a consideration," he said reflectively.

"Now don't go all logical on me at this late date," said Jenny earnestly. She followed him into the bedroom and watched as he peeled off his uniform tunic. He took a robe from the closet, tossed it onto the bed, and sat down near it to pull off his boots.

Jenny walked over to the bed, absently winding her hair up again. She had both hands on her hair, holding it more or less in place, when she remembered where most of the pins were. On the floor in the other room.

"Brilliant, as usual," she commented, with a glance at Slair. "I--"

He looked up, letting his boots fall to the floor. Staring at her, he lifted one eyebrow very slightly.

"What's so funny?" said Jenny, turning toward the door.

As she pivoted, Slair leaned forward, curving his arm under her robe and around her waist. A bit startled, Jenny dropped her hands from her

hair to his arm. Slair swept one leg forward, kicking her feet out from under her, and swept his arm back and down.

Jenny landed flat on her back beside him. "I thought you were going to take a shower," she said, with an automatic attempt to rise.

The pressure of his arm increased. "Later. I changed my mind." He moved his arm, running his hand firmly over the curve of her hip.

Grinning, Jenny sat up, reaching for the clasp of her robe. "What, in the middle of the aftern--"

Slair's arm shot out to slam her flat on the mattress, his hand over hers. Shifting his weight to his hand, he held her down. The pressure



ground the clasp of her robe painfully into her shoulder and the palm of her hand.

"Shut up," he said amiably. He ran his other hand over her breast to her arm, where his fingers dug into her.

Jenny repressed a wince and said, "Oh, damn," softly in English. Although she'd long ago learned Slair wouldn't really hurt her when he felt like playing roughly, and it no longer frightened her, she always collected a choice assortment of bruises.

Slair released her trapped hand to close his fingers on her throat and trail his thumb along her chin. Jenny shook her head. Someday, when she felt really suicidal, she was going to give in and indulge her impulse to slug Slair when he started this playful tiger routine.

*I wonder what he'd do if I tried it. Besides falling out of bed laughing, that is. Oh, well. . . .* She slid her hand behind his head and brought his mouth down to hers.

He shifted again to hold her, kissing her with force and without haste. Jenny's arms closed around him as she relaxed under his warm, familiar weight.

Just as she let her eyes close, Slair shoved himself up to rest on one elbow, his hand going to the clasp of her robe. He hooked his fingers over the neckline of the garment, closed his hand, and gave a short, sharp jerk.

"It's a good thing you have plenty of money," Jenny observed, lifting her head to survey the torn fabric. "This could turn into an expensive hobby."

Slair's mouth twitched. He sat up, and gave the side of her face a soft, backhanded slap. "I can afford to indulge myself."

"And a good thing, too." Jenny rolled off her former robe and shoved it over the edge of the bed. Lying on her stomach, chin propped on her fists, she studied Slair as he undid his uniform pants and casually dropped his clothes on the floor by her robe. As he sat beside her again, Jenny began to giggle.

"I request enlightenment," Slair said dryly.

Jenny tilted her head to look at him. "Once every seven years, huh?" she managed, then buried her head on her folded arms, her shoulders shaking.

Slair took a handful of her hair and tugged sharply.

Jenny raised her head, still giggling. "Yes?"

"Now really, Jenny--"

"When I consider that back when I was a STAR TREK fan, I was always one of the people who thought living with Vulcans would be incredibly dull because--because they would probably *always* fold their clothes *first*--"

"You and your peculiar friends seem to have had an exceedingly limited conversational range." Slair touched the back of her neck. Then he traced his fingers down the line of her back to her waist, very slowly. "And do you find the reality--incredibly dull?"

Jenny slanted a glance up at him and grinned broadly. "Dull is not *exactly* the word I'd choose to describe it."

Slair's eyebrows angled upward.

Shaking with barely-suppressed laughter, Jenny put her hand over the one he rested on her back. She rolled over, trapping his hand under her.

"Oh, for--" she began. In addition to trapping Slair, she'd neatly immobilized herself, awkwardly twisting her arm under her as well.

"A tactical error." Leaning across Jenny, Slair easily caught her other hand. He looked down at her, his eyes very yellow. "And now?"

Jenny's grin faded and his grip loosened. She pulled her hand from his grip, placed it on his chest, and shoved gently.

Slair moved just enough to allow her to free her pinned arm. She put her arms around him, bringing him down and close.

"Oh, yes, something did happen. It was really pretty funny, too." Particularly now that Slair was back and she was curled safely and companionably in his arms.

"Oh?" said Slair. "And what so amused you?"

Jenny shifted to a more comfortable position and launched into the story, which became progressively funnier as she recalled it, of her encounter with Senior Lieutenant Ellion R'elek a few days earlier.

"--and there he was--doing direct quotations from that stupid episode, too--saying how useful I'd be--*me*--" Jenny turned her face to Slair's chest. Recovering after a second, she went on, still on the edge of laughter, "As far as *I* could tell, he wanted me to sell him all your secrets. I told him everything I know, which took about two seconds, and --"

She stopped and lifted her head. Slair had stiffened, his arm tense and hard around her. His face was closed, cold, and the glacial quality of his gaze shocked her. She instinctively tried to move away. Slair's arm was an unyielding bar.

"And you tell me this because you think it amusing."

"Well, it was," said Jenny. "Sort of?"

"More than you know."

As Jenny looked at him, uncertain and puzzled, his grimness vanished. His arm around her was once more security rather than restraint. She took a deep breath and dropped her head back to his shoulder.

He brushed her hair from her face, rested his fingers on her cheek. "Yes. Amusing."

*NOW he thinks it's funny.* She was never going to understand him, any more than he really understood her. *Sometimes we think we do. But we don't.*

"Besides," she added after a moment, "I didn't know what to do about it. I mean--really, Slair, I may be sort of dim sometimes, but even I can see it would be stupid for anyone to agree to that. Maybe Ellion R'elek is out of his mind. What possible reason--"

Slair tapped her cheek gently. "Exactly what did the lieutenant say? And not one of your verbally decorated jokings. As exactly as possible, Jenny."

"Well . . . " Jenny closed her eyes and tried to reproduce that peculiar conversation. After a few minutes, she concluded with, "--and I said no. And he said that with the right backing I could still be the third officer's lady."

"Are you sure?" Slair's voice was sharp.

Jenny nodded, her cheek rubbing his chest. "Yes. That was just before he started quoting Sulu. That's when I started laughing."

"You would. Anything else?"

"I think he was a little annoyed," Jenny said with commendable understatement. She tried not to tense at the memory. "Then two people came in and I left. And I never in my life would have thought I'd ever be that glad to see Marudy Tam," she finished.

There was a period of silence. Slair began tracing his thumb over her cheek, rather absently. Jenny slanted a glance at his face. He was staring into space, considering and withdrawn.

Jenny closed her eyes again, waiting. Maybe Slair would tell her and maybe he wouldn't. In any case, it was his problem and he was quite capable of taking care of that crazy lieutenant. Ellion R'elek wouldn't bother her as long as Slair was around.

She'd been dozing off, but that thought yanked her awake. "Slair!"

"What is it?"

"Lieutenant R'elek--"

"The matter will be attended to." His voice was curt.

"Yes, but--" She hesitated. Well, silly or not, she was going to ask. "Slair, suppose he gets mad and tries to--to bother me when you're not around?" she said hurriedly. She pushed herself up to look at him with questioning worry.

"He won't," said Slair flatly, and pulled her back into his arms.

Pleasantly tired from swimming, and thinking with interest of lunch, Jenny fastened the last buckles on her coppery-orange slacks and plopped down on the changing room bench. Humming under her breath, she stretched, tossed back her hair, and reached for the matching bodice lying near her on the bench.

A hand fell firmly on her bare shoulder. She gasped and leaped up, whirling around. Her eyes widened and she crossed her arms over her breasts, backing into the locker door.

"I want to talk to you," Captain len Ronan said. He smiled and stepped over the bench. His pale eyes caught and held hers.

Jenny's fingers dug into her arms. Len Ronan always terrified her, his presence freezing her brain. "C-captain? What--"

"What am I doing here? I'm the captain. I go where I please." Len Ronan put his hands on his hips. He cocked his head to one side, observing her with a sardonic smile. His eyes were colorless ice. "You're really amazing--what's that outlandish name of yours?--oh, yes. Jenny. Truly amazing."

"M-me?" Jenny couldn't tear her eyes from the captain's intent gaze.

"Yes, Jenny. You." Len Ronan put his hand on the wall beside her. "So you went running right to Slair with the late Lieutenant R'elek's offer. What intrigues me," he placed his other hand on the wall, trapping her between them, "is *why*?"

Jenny stared at him, wide-eyed and mute.

"Nothing to say for yourself?" Len Ronan's smile deepened. "How very odd. When I understand that you and our laconic third have plenty to say--to each other."

"That's different," Jenny whispered, pressing her arms tighter over her breasts and her body flat against the locker door.



"Is it, now?" He laughed. "Well, you can talk to me, too, Jenny. In fact, I insist upon it." He removed his hands from the wall and stepped back. "Do sit down."

His hand shot out and he grabbed her wrist, wrenching her around and sending her stumbling to sit heavily on the bench.

Taking advantage of her position, Jenny tried to snatch up her bodice from the bench. As her hand closed on the garment le Ronan brought the hilt of his dagger down to strike her wrist with a sharp crack.

Biting her lip and trying to ignore the pain, Jenny very slowly pulled her hand back. She kept her eyes cautiously on len Ronan, who was holding his dagger by the blade and tapping the hilt gently on the palm of his hand.

Whatever he wanted, she was caught until he chose to let her go. Even if someone came in, no one would interfere--not with the captain. Unless Slair just happened to wander away from his duty-post and into the women's locker room . . . Moving with great care, Jenny sat upright and recrossed her arms.

"That's better," said the captain pleasantly. He moved to the bench and set his foot on it, close to her thigh. Leaning his arm on his knee, he bent forward.

"What do you want?" Jenny tried to conceal the note of panic. "Captain."

"Do you know," len Ronan put the hilt of his knife under her chin, "I can't think of any other woman who'd be stupid enough to take Slair a story like that. After all, why make him mistrust you more than he must already?" He paused.

"Oh." Jenny couldn't think of anything else to say.

"What a charming act. Does Slair like it?" The knife hilt slapped her cheek, hard enough to sting. "I don't," he said conversationally.

"Jesus," Jenny said. Her voice shook.

"As I was saying," he continued, "you have your little games, and I have mine. I do not care to have them interfered with." He leaned closer and she shrank back. "Is that understood?"

Jenny nodded, hesitantly. Even though she didn't understand in the least, she wouldn't have disagreed with len Ronan for any inducement short of having him disappear the next second.

"Now that we have that settled . . ." Len Ronan's voice was silken. He tucked the knife into the top of his boot.

Jenny began edging away from him, starting to rise.



Len Ronan's hand shot out again, this time to wind in her hair and yank her back to her seat with a jolt. "Did I say you could go?" His voice was still pleasant, and he was still smiling.

As Jenny stared at him, cold spread over her arms. "Oh, God," she whispered soundlessly, and put a hand to her mouth.

"You interest me, Jenny," len Ronan said. He angled his head, observing her with exaggerated consideration. "Point one: Slair still has you. Point two: you stay with Slair. I can't imagine why."

Jenny did not respond. She felt too sick to move.

After waiting a moment, len Ronan inclined his head and continued, "It certainly can't be his openhanded generosity that appeals. And as for you--" He pulled her hand from her mouth, holding her wrist in an iron grip, and ran his gaze over her. "It can't be your beauty that holds him."

"Let me go," she said in English. "*Please.*"

This earned her another hard, painful yank of her hair. "Speak a language I understand. It's more polite. Although politeness isn't your outstanding trait, from what I hear." The slow smile reappeared. He released her wrist, sliding his hand up her arm to grasp her chin.

"That vaunted temper of yours--I might find it diverting," he continued. "I enjoy a woman who fights back."

Jenny stared at him in sheer, ill horror.

The captain's expression changed as he watched her face. "A coward, as well as vicious, are you?" he said softly. There was an odd gleam in his pale eyes. "Oh, yes, I might find you entertaining. Very."

He dropped his hand to her shoulder, deliberately digging his nails into her skin. He bent forward. Heedless of his grip on hair and shoulder, Jenny tried to jump to her feet.

He moved with her, faster. A second later, he had Jenny pressed against him, and held one of her arms twisted up behind her back. The fabric of his uniform was harsh on her skin.

"Not your beauty," he said, as if in careful contemplation. "Not your temper? No, I don't think so. As for your reasons for remaining with him-- What, then? Is he *that* good in bed?" Len Ronan lifted an eyebrow in mocking inquiry. "Or are you?"

Jenny knew what was coming. "No," she said, without hope.

Len Ronan laughed, tightening his hold on her arm and hair, and kissed her.

Jenny made one convulsive attempt to struggle. Len Ronan increased the pressure on her arm and jerked. Jenny froze, and concentrated instead on clenching her teeth against his lips.

He finally straightened and pushed her back, running his hand over her breasts. Then, to Jenny's stunned and thankful surprise, he released her, shoving her forcefully away.

She let her aching arm fall to her side and curbed her first, instinctive, impulse to wipe her hand hard across her mouth. Len Ronan was totally vicious and totally unpredictable. It was like being locked in with an insane cobra; moving would be daring too much.

The captain moved casually to the door. There he turned. "Tell *that* to the commander, with my compliments. I shall await his reaction with great interest." He eyed her for an instant, smiled broadly, and left.

Jenny stared, shaking, at the closed door. Then she wiped her mouth with her hand, looking at the bruise starting where the knife hilt had slammed her wrist. She was afraid she was going to be sick.

She swallowed hard, then rapidly undid the buckles of her slacks, yanked them off, and tossed them to the bench. With stiff control, she walked back to dive into the pool.

Several furious laps later, tension and fatigue caught up with her, leaving her limp. She managed to reach the shallows of the pool to stand in the warm waist-deep water, resting her head and arms on the edge.

*Tell Slair? Not bloody likely, Captain. Not if you're hoping I'll do just that. I don't care what you did to me. She fought down revulsion at the mere thought of len Ronan. After all, what had he done, really? Touched her, kissed her. Big deal.*

And if she told Slair? Len Ronan was the captain, and a captain firmly ensconced in Fleet Command's good graces. Slair couldn't remove him as she knew he'd removed Ellion R'elek--

She inhaled sharply and lifted her head from her arms. The captain knew about that too. Furthermore, he'd known *why*.

With the right backing, still the third officer's. Don't interfere with my games. Captain len Ronan had been behind that move of Lieutenant R'elek's.

"Oh, no," Jenny said. Did Slair know that part of it? *He must. He knew the minute I said the word 'backing', didn't he? Well, then. NOW I see.* After a minute, she ducked under water, resurfaced, and hauled herself out of the pool.

Back in the changing room, she devoted her full attention to drying and dressing. By the time she had fastened on her clothes and plaited

her wet hair into a braid, she felt she looked normal enough to pass muster, even if she ran into Slair.

She had also come to an unshakable decision that this was one thing she would not tell him. If Slair ever got into a real fight with len Ronan-- Jenny's mouth tightened. Well, he wasn't going to *this* time, because she had no intention of obligingly following the captain's last instruction.

She swung her locker door shut, and winced. *That damned sadist!* Now she'd better go see if she had any makeup that would hide these bruises that were so clearly finger marks. If Slair saw those--

"He *won't*," Jenny said vehemently.

The following week passed peacefully enough. As days slid by and len Ronan paid no further attention to her, Jenny deliberately pushed her memory of the incident to join other things she wanted to forget. She had enough trouble without raking up old problems.

The next bit of excitement was, fortunately, not personal. A merchant ship found itself in serious difficulties. The *Victory* being the closest ship of the line, or, for that matter, the closest non-pirate vessel, went warping to their assistance.

Jenny spent an enthralled morning at the large viewscreen in the officers' lounge, watching as the *Victory* maneuvered up to the other ship and took it in tow.

"How nice," said Marudy Tam, wandering into the lounge and glancing at the screen. "They will undoubtedly ask us over. I'm getting a little sick of this ship. We haven't had a decent stopover for more than a month."

"Any excuse for a party," Jenny said to Slair later that day, as she changed clothes.

Slair knotted the sash of his dress uniform. "You do not wish to attend?"

"You mean I have a choice?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Of course I want to go. I've never been on a merchant ship." She held up her necklace and turned, bending her head. "Help me fasten this damn thing, will you?"

† †                      † †                      † †

"Oh," said Jenny blankly, trying to sound intelligent and enthusiastic. The young engineer, delighted to find an officer's lady willing to listen to *him* talk about his engines, had just provided her with a detailed analysis of the recent problem. She had understood three words in three thousand.

"So, you see--"

"Yes, but what was *wrong* with it?" said Jenny, frustrated.

"The differential shieldings interacted with the antimatter interface and--"

"The doubletalk generators are broken again!" Jenny said delightedly, with a flashing grin..

The engineer, after blinking doubtfully for a moment, grinned back.

"How charming," said Captain len Ronan, close behind her. "Looking for a little variety, commander's lady?"

Jenny instantly lost any enjoyment she'd had. She turned to keep an eye on len Ronan, noticing that the engineer had also lost his friendly grin at the captain's words.

len Ronan looked pointedly from Jenny to the merchant's engineer and back again. "I've come to a decision about you, lady," the captain said. "You're--"

"Yes, Captain?" Slair appeared, miraculously, at Jenny's side.

Her muscles unknotted. *Oh, Slair. Thank God.*

The captain's eyes went to Slair, then back to Jenny. "--lacking in taste," he finished.

Jenny's gaze flew to Slair's face. His impassive expression did not alter. "Indeed, Captain?" he said.

At that, the engineer to whom she'd been talking only moments ago backed off several steps. Then he walked quickly away to join another group.

By now, Jenny knew only too well that apparent isolation did not mean they were not overheard. Everyone in the room was probably listening at this point.

"Indeed, Commander," len Ronan said. "Lacking in taste--and judgment." He turned to Jenny, his lips slowly curving in a charming smile. "If you're bored, Jenny--I did offer you an alternative."

The blood drained from Jenny's face and her hands turned to ice. "No," she said in English. "*No*. Why are you *doing* this to me?"

Slair gave her only a brief glance. It was more than enough.

Len Ronan lifted one eyebrow and eyed Jenny with every appearance of regret. "Well, no accounting for taste--particularly hers. No lieutenants, no civilians, no captains. . . . Tell me, Jenny, exactly what are you waiting for?"

"No," said Jenny. "Nothing."

"No?" len Ronan said. "Your favorite word, is it not? Nothing?" He shrugged, and raised his glass to her. "As you say."

Slair was staring at her, his expression icy and unreadable.

"Slair," she said desperately, adding in Vulcan, "please--"

"Shut up," he replied flatly in the same language, and gave his attention to the captain. In Standard, he continued, "Would you care to clarify your remarks, Captain?"

Jenny shut her eyes. *I can't stand this, I can't--*

"Am I being obscure?" len Ronan asked. "How careless of me."

"You are never that," Slair said. "As for your comments on--"

"*Your* taste?" the captain said. His voice took on a reflective note. "Well, I too might find her amusing. Briefly." He paused. "A proposition, Commander. Lend her to me for a few days."

Jenny's eyes flew open and she half-turned to Slair. Even if he were really furious with her-- *Oh, God, he wouldn't!*

"Or better still," the captain went on, as Slair did not respond, "an exchange. You provide me with Jenny, I lend you Hananel. For a few days only, you understand." Len Ronan eyed Jenny, an appraising twist to his smile. "That should be quite, quite sufficient."

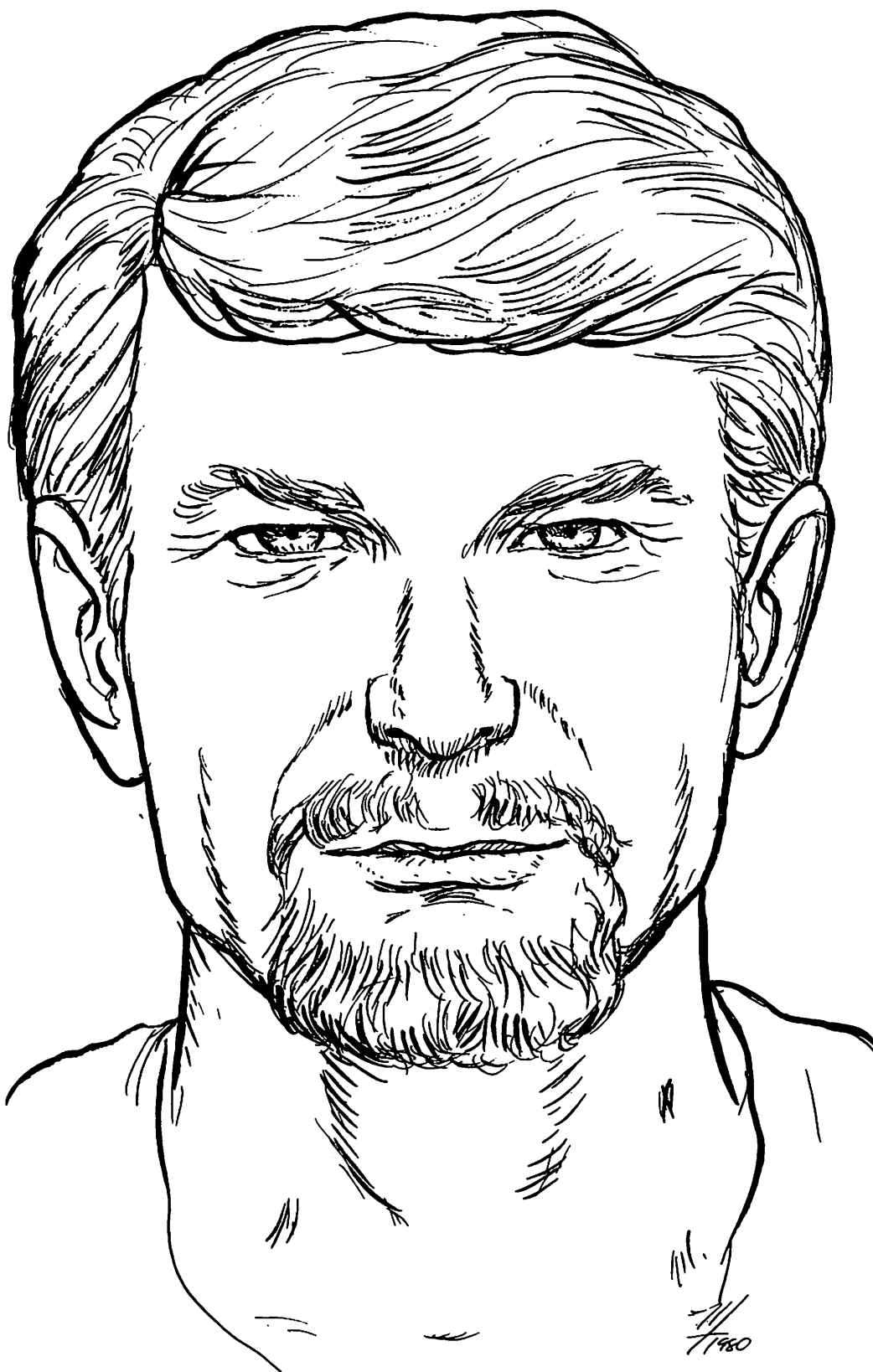
"No," said Slair. "I think not, Captain."

"No? Perhaps you're wise, Commander. I wouldn't care to trust her in another's bed, myself." Then len Ronan gave a short laugh. "Although considering the quality of her kisses, she stands in sad need of proper schooling."

There was a dead silence. Len Ronan was still, waiting, regarding Slair with an air of suppressed anticipation.

Slair did not move. "Be assured, Captain, I shall take the matter under all due advisement."

Len Ronan surveyed him with odd, detached disappointment. Then, with a last meaningful glance at Jenny, he merely said, "With your usual competence, Commander?"



Captain Gellis Ien Ronan



"Do you doubt it, Captain?"

"Oh, no, Commander," said the captain gently. "Never." He nodded to Slair, smiled sweetly at Jenny, and walked off.

The atmosphere in the room relaxed, and the conversational level gradually increased from subdued whispers to normal hubbub. Everyone studiously ignored Slair and Jenny.

Jenny was freezing cold, numbed. She couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of trouble and grief this scene would cost her. And the whole thing had taken the captain less than five minutes. Hesitantly, unwillingly, she looked at Slair.

His face was completely impassive, its frozen control giving no hint of his thoughts. But his eyes had gone pale and yellow.

He said nothing. After a moment, he too walked off, leaving Jenny standing alone. She watched him for another long minute, then turned blindly to go and get a very strong and preferably lethal drink.

Slair did not approach her again until the end of the seemingly interminable party. When he did, he said only, "We're leaving." Neither of them said another word until they had returned to the *Victory* and the privacy of his quarters.

The instant the door closed behind them, Slair grabbed Jenny's arm, swung her around, and slapped her sharply across the face.

"*This* you do not tell me," he said. His fingers bit into her arm. "What is it that goes on in your mind?"

Jenny's hand went to her burning cheek. She'd been trying to steel herself for this all evening, but the painful reality still left her shocked and hurt, fighting back tears.

"Why did you not tell me about the captain?"

"Slair, I--"

"You were quick enough to inform on R'elek, were you not?" Slair increased his already-painful grip on her arm. "Are you attempting some tortuous ploy of your own? Or are you merely insane?"

Jenny shook her head, unable to speak.

Slair jerked her arm and snapped, "Well?"

"Because I was afraid," Jenny got out. "I--"

"You should be," he said. "If you think to play the captain's--"

"No!" said Jenny in frightened, vigorous denial. Let Slair once start thinking like that-- "I was afraid that if I told you, you'd be

so angry you'd get into a real fight with him. That's what he wanted. Even I could see that! He *told* me to tell you--do you think I'd say anything after that?"

Slair stared at her coldly. "In the future, *I* am to be the one who decides what it is important that I hear, not you. Is that clearly understood?"

Jenny began to nod obediently, despite her fast-developing headache.

"In any case, it is my concern," Slair added. "Not yours."

Not her concern. Sheer and unexpected anger flooded Jenny. "Not my concern?" she said, her voice shaking, this time with fury. She made a vain effort to wrench free. "I'm not crazy, *you* are!"

There was a split-second pause. Then Slair slammed his hand across her face again, harder. "Shut--"

"I will not shut up!" Her vision blurred with tears of pain and anger. "Not my concern, when I'm right in the middle? Not my concern, when I got dragged into this whole mess in the first place just because you and that--that *captain* were having the stupidest fight I've ever heard of in my entire life?"

Beyond caution or sense, she yanked her arm from his hold, knocking his hand away. "*Not my concern*--and if you get yourself killed, Commander, *what happens to me?*"

The repressed, unexamined fear underlying her life had finally been forced into the open. It was too late to call back the words. Ignoring both tears and ringing headache, she looked at Slair, waiting.

The pause lengthened, the silence expanding until it was almost tangible.

Bleak desolation buried Jenny's anger. What was she waiting to hear? Confirmation? There was nothing else Slair could say. She knew too damn well just how closely her fortunes were woven with his. If anything happened to Slair--

If they were planetside, she might have a chance, a very slim chance. It was possible--just--that Tavra might help her. But if it came to a choice between saving Jenny's life and avenging Slair's death, Jenny had no illusions as to which Tavra would choose--assuming Tavra too were still alive.

If the lidded violence of the ship ever truly erupted, and Slair lost, and she, by some misfortune, survived, she could only hope she'd have the brains and nerve to cut her throat before len Ronan or anyone else got his hands on her. *And I don't even have a knife.* Jenny gave a strangled half-sobbing laugh and put her hands over her mouth.

Slair still stood looking at her, his face as blankly expressionless as she'd ever seen it.

Wasn't he going to say *anything*? The thought almost made her laugh. What was she doing, waiting for him to apologize? *How long until Hell freezes over?*

The silence had almost solidified, the time past when it could have been easily broken. When Slair at last moved, it was to turn and walk away.

"Is that the *only* way you know to end an argument, Commander?" Jenny hardly recognized the low, vicious tone as hers.

Slair turned slowly back to face her. "Shut up," he said, his voice dangerously flat.

Jenny's mouth tightened and her hands clenched. She wanted to slash at Slair, hurt him back. She retained just enough sense to know that the cost would be too damn high.

"Yes, Commander," she said through gritted teeth. She swept her skirts to one side and sank into a rigidly-correct curtsy. "Anything you say, Commander."

Without waiting for Slair's response, if any, she straightened, spun around, walked stiffly into the bedroom and closed the door.

*For all the good it did me*, she thought bitterly a few days later, mentally reviewing the scene for the hundredth unwilling time. *Talk about empty gestures . . .* She couldn't lock Slair out. After the hours of hostile silence, he had insisted on pulling her to him once they were in bed.

She still couldn't figure out whether it had been an attempt to ignore the episode completely, or just a demonstration of his ability to force her obedience. All it had done was rekindle her anger and hurt.

It had been as disastrously unsuccessful as that eternally-damned party and its aftermath, arousing in her only a passionate desire to smash Slair. Later, once sure he was asleep, she'd wept into her pillow until it was soggy and she was exhausted.

Slair hadn't touched her since. They'd hardly even spoken.

*Right back where we started.* Jenny groped on the dressing table for her brush and began pulling it through her long hair. That was sometimes a soothing operation.

Not soothing enough. After a moment, she slammed the brush down and stared unseeing at the mirror. *Right back where we started.* After all this time, all the painful adjustment, the sheer draining effort of acceptance, compliance-- The hard-won tranquillity, the cautious affection, all shattered to provide Captain Ien Ronan with a moment's malicious amusement.

"May he rot in hell," said Jenny in a dispassionate voice. Three days of icy silence and solid suffocating anger had left her too tired for vehemence. "Damn him. And damn Slair, too."

At that, she picked up a small, velvety box from the cluttered dressing table. Slair had handed it to her yesterday, without comment. The *Victory* had escorted the handicapped merchant ship to the nearest starbase, and he had apparently taken advantage of the unscheduled stopover.

She tipped the earrings into her hand, a spill of gold and red fire. When she'd opened the box yesterday, under the silent pressure of Slair's gaze, her first hot impulse was to throw the beautiful, ornate things in his face. Her second was to start crying. She'd controlled both. "Tavra does pick the most charming trinkets," she'd said in a dead voice. "Where are you going--party, reception, or banquet?"

Jenny closed her hand over the earrings, then suddenly twisted in her chair and hurled them across the room. Another empty gesture, that, since she'd damn well better pick them up before Slair walked in and stepped on them.

She rested her elbows on the dressing table and propped her head on her hands. Then she jerked upright at the soft swish of the outer door. *Let him say something this time. Please. I can't take much more of this.*

A moment later, Slair walked into the bedroom. He glanced at Jenny, and to her dismay she felt her own stiffening withdrawal. Slair paid no further attention to her, going to the closet and pulling out his long green tunic.

Once changed from uniform to green tunic, he moved toward the door. He did not look at her.

*I can't stand this*, Jenny thought, staring at him in despair. If only he would say something, *anything*, that she could grab as a lifeline back across this horrible gap of silence. But he wasn't going to. He was probably capable of keeping her as his lady for the next ten years and never saying another word to her. And she would freeze to death.

Jenny bent her head and covered her face with her hands. Burning tears she could not control slid through her fingers.

Slair's unexpected touch on her shoulder made her jump. "I grow tired of this," he said.

Jenny refused to look up at him, keeping her face hidden in her hands. *He was tired of it? What was she supposed to do--apologize because he'd hit her?* When he should have been mad at the captain?

Slair forced her hands away from her wet face. Jenny quickly turned her head.

"All right, Jenny." His voice did sound tired. He touched her cheek, wiping tears away. "What--"

His touch dissolved the painful core of her unhappy anger. She curled her fingers around his hand. "Oh, Slair." Her voice shook. She pressed his hand closer to her cheek. "Slair--"

He ran a finger over the curve of her eyebrow. His touch was almost tentative. Jenny looked up to find a peculiar expression of wariness on his face.

With a choking laugh that was not quite a sob, she jumped to her feet and flung her arms tightly around him, ducking her face into the curve of his shoulder.

Slair's arms closed comfortingly hard around her. "There are times, Jenny, when I suspect I do not understand you at all." When she did not reply, merely trying to pull him into a closer embrace, he gathered a handful of her hair to tilt her head back. "You might at least have said 'Pass the salt'."

Jenny stared at him with blank incomprehension. The corner of his mouth twitched up slightly. She smiled back, unsteadily, started to laugh, and then to cry. She buried her face on his shoulder again, clinging to him as if afraid to let go.

"That's enough," he said firmly after several minutes. He moved his hands to her shoulders and pushed her back a pace. "Are you back to normal?"

Jenny wiped her hand over her face. "God, I certainly hope so," she said fervently.

Slair studied her face. "So do I." He hesitated. "I have no desire to see you so desperately unhappy."

"You could have apologized," Jenny said.

"For what?" said Slair, with a puzzled lift to his eyebrow.

Jenny stared at him, choked, and collapsed into totally helpless laughter. "You are the limit," she gasped in English. "The utter and absolute limit." He'd never understand such a quick, colloquial utterance, particularly one so colored by giggles.

Slair shook his head slightly and moved toward the shelf in the wall by the bed. Halfway there, he stopped, looked down, back at Jenny, and raised his eyebrows.

She put a hand to her mouth to stifle her giggles and went to see what he wanted.

Glowing red stones and goldwork--the forgotten earrings.

"Oh, God, I *knew* you were going to do that." It was the last coherent phrase she managed before falling to the bed in a fresh burst of laughter.

"Jenny," said Slair, "you--"

Jenny sat up and impulsively held out her hand. When Slair, after a quick, odd look, put his hand in hers, she closed her fingers tightly. The corner of his mouth lifted. Still holding his hand, she fell back onto the bed, pulling him down beside her.

"Either I'm gettin stronger than I realized," said Jenny, propping herself up on one elbow, "or you let me do that."

Slair made no move to touch her. "You are crazy, Jenny."

"I can't help that," she said, and leaned over to kiss him.

It turned into a far warmer embrace than she'd anticipated. When she finally moved back, it was only to smile at him before kissing him again. Slair's arms were hot around her through her thin robe, and Jenny settled against him, fitting her mouth to his.

Now everything would be all right again, and she'd be more careful. She stiffened, suddenly cold. Oh, perfectly all right. One semi-kind word from a man who'd been hitting her a few days ago and she fell into his arms. What the hell was wrong with her? Where was her pride, her integrity, her self-respect?

"Jenny?" Slair sat up, bringing her up with him. He took her face between his hands. For the first time since she'd known him, he looked almost worried.

Self-respect? She couldn't afford self-respect, any more than she could afford to be angry at Slair. *I don't care WHAT the god-damn poets say*, Jenny thought angrily. Stone walls made a pretty damn good prison. So did lack of money, weakness, an Imperial starship--she had few real options. Her choices were limited.

*No. Not limited. Non-existent. You had your chance. You made your choice over a year ago. Over a year ago, when a total stranger had said, 'Will*



you sleep with me to save your life?' *You said yes, Jenny. Yes. It's too late to quibble about the terms now.*

"Jenny?" Slair's tone had lost its warmth; his face had taken on a reserve.

She shook her head, trying to smile, and held out her hands.

"I find you exceedingly difficult to comprehend," said Slair later.

"Don't worry about it." Jenny's voice was drowsy.

Slair gave her hair a quick yank. "Are you going to sleep--again? Wake up."

"Why?" she said crossly.

Slair gently pushed her away, then leaned over the edge of the bed. When he straightened, he held the red-and-gold earrings. "Your casual attitude toward jewelry continues to amaze me."

"Oh. Those." Jenny still couldn't feel enthusiastic about that particular pair of decorations.

Slair took her hand and closed it over the earrings. "And I thought you liked red."

Jenny sat up. "*You picked-- I thought Tavra--*" She stopped, an odd, Uhura-ish voice doing singsong equations in her mind. *Lady and officer fight. Lady sulks. Officer gives her jewelry. She stops sulking. You didn't . . . stop . . . sulking. . . .* "Oh, dear," she said, trying not to grin. *Poor Slair.*

His face was closed, guarded, again. "Jenny--"

"Yes?" she said after a moment.

"I did not know," he said slowly, "what else to try."

This was an enormous concession. It must have cost him a real effort to say something like that to her. Jenny dropped the earrings onto the pillow and touched his arm. "Oh, Slair."

He took her hand and traced his thumb over her palm. "The only present in which I have ever seen you display more than superficial interest was the kitten Tekitta gave you." He shook his head. "And a kitten I could not get you."

"You would have gotten me a cat?"

"You would prefer a cat to jewels?" Slair still didn't sound as if he really thought she meant it.

"Damn right," said Jenny. She hesitated, then leaned forward to kiss him. "Thank you anyway. For the thought, if nothing else."

He turned to the wall-niche by his side of the bed. "I found this," he said abruptly. "If you do not find it to your admittedly peculiar taste, you may choose something else."

*Oh, no, not more jewelry!*

Slair carefully turned her hand palm up and placed a small circle of glinting honey-gold in it.

Jenny studied his face. It was stiff, withdrawn--whatever this was, he was not at all sure she would like it. It was a ring, by the feel, of smooth metal, without gemstones. She uncurled her fingers to look at it.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, Slair." A ring. A cat. Speechless, Jenny tried it on. She found it fit naturally on the middle finger of her left hand, the little golden cat smugly asleep, its elongated tail wrapping around her finger and back over its neck. "Slair, it's adorable. I love it. Where did you *find* it?"

"You really like it?" His face had relaxed. He looked pleased, but somewhat puzzled.

"That's only because I'm a provincial outlander and have no taste," said Jenny. Her eyes were on the ring gleaming warmly on her finger. "Slair, I-- Thank you."

Slair put his hand under her chin and tilted her head back. "If I had fully realized precisely how little you know about jewelry, I could have saved myself a great deal of money."

"What?" Jenny placed her left hand on his chest, the cat-ring catching light. "And have everyone saying the great Commander Slair is--dare I say it?--cheap?"

"Now really, Jenny--"

She grinned, then started to laugh softly. The mere *thought* of what any of the other officer's ladies would say about a trinket like the cat-ring--if they ever even noticed it--was almost enough to cause hysterics.

Slair gave her hair a warning tug. Still laughing, Jenny leaned against him and shifted her weight to bring them both back down on the bed.

Some time later, Slair pushed himself up on his elbow. Gazing down at Jenny, he gently brushed her hair back. "I thought you wanted to go to sleep."



"You're not the only one who can change your mind," she said, and drew him back down to her.

Slair tightened his security precautions, and Jenny's movements were considerably restricted when he was absent during the next few months. But whatever Captain Ien Ronan's plans, he made no further attempt at suborning Jenny or publicly antagonizing Slair.

As far as Jenny could tell, the rest of the ship hadn't had such an entertaining time in years, and were waiting with baited breath for the next exciting installment. They were probably really disappointed when nothing else notable happened between captain and third officer. The third officer's lady didn't care what they thought. As long as she was securely in favor with Slair and the captain stayed away, nothing else mattered very much.

Then the *Victory* was reassigned, and the round of diplomatic missions and receptions began again. Much to Jenny's disappointment, she found that major overhauls and correspondingly long leaves did not occur every six months.

Receptions. Balls. Formal dinners. Shopping with Tenaya. Sight-seeing. One brief, shining interlude in the form of a far too short leave spent home on Vakai. Jenny was immensely pleased to find that Dinah, now a full-grown cat, still remembered her--or at least Jenny could pretend she did.

And back to the *Victory* once more . . .

A party without dancing wasn't much of a party. And Slair was busy talking to somebody or other. Jenny, bored, picked out a drink and wandered out of the main room. There should be an observation area around here somewhere, judging by the location of this place.

After a few minutes idle search, she found it, a corridor with a clear wall providing a magnificent view of the space station's docking area. She wasn't the only person who'd come to look at stars and ships, but she ignored the others. Most of them were, in any case, at least as interested in their companions as in the view.

What Jenny was interested in was the slender, brightly painted ship that was easing its way to a docking-port. Her concentration was broken as she sensed, rather than heard, someone behind her. Jenny half-turned to find herself facing a small, strikingly beautiful woman, stylishly clad and lavishly jewelled in silver and black. Only the woman's high-



piled swirls of intricately twined dark hair brought her past Jenny's shoulder. She looked a flawless thirty, which meant she was probably forty at the least.

*Wow. An honest-to-God pocket Venus,* was Jenny's envious thought. The woman's honey-hued face seemed vaguely familiar, somehow. *I should know her.* But she didn't think the woman was someone she'd met recently. Her memory wasn't that bad. The sense of recognition nagged at Jenny. *Now who . . . ?*

The woman had paused as Jenny turned. Her slanting dark eyes flicked across Jenny's face. When her eyes met Jenny's, the woman held her gaze for an instant, and then slowly studied Jenny from hair to sandaled feet.

It was an impersonal, calculating appraisal. Under the slightly bored scrutiny, Jenny's face grew hot. It made her feel that this flame-red dress she was so fond of was neither elegant nor becoming, merely plain, and that she was sadly underdressed. She tried to stare back without looking uncomfortable. The other woman, apparently noting nothing whatsoever worthy of interest, began to walk off.

"Marlena, attend."

At the sound of the deep, precise voice behind her, Jenny's fingers tightened on her half-empty glass. She knew, with absolute certainty, who stood there. Excited anticipation mingled with a strange reluctance to turn and confront him.

The black-and-silver vision had stopped and turned at the summons, a small smile curving her lips. "Ah, Spock," she said. "I was beginning to think myself abandoned." She moved gracefully past Jenny.

Jenny pivoted to watch as Marlena joined Spock and placed a heavily-gemmed hand on the Vulcan's arm. *Marlena. Of course. She's Marlena. The CAPTAIN'S woman, huh?*

Spock raised one eyebrow, a mannerism more familiar to Jenny from years of STAR TREK reruns than some of her own habits. "You need have little fear of that," he told Marlena. "One who would abandon such an asset would be a fool indeed."

Marlena's smile widened.

*Cat with a cream-pot,* was Jenny's unkind reaction. *Good grief.* She couldn't quite believe she was actually looking at Spock. It had been such a long time since she'd seen him. He bore almost too much resemblance to his television counterpart, even with the neat beard, to seem completely real. But there was something oddly *off* about the picture. Oh, of course, the uniform--this Spock was in the gold-shimmered black of Port rank personnel. And he looked so *young*.

Spock lifted his head and glanced casually over at Jenny.



Jenny's interested excitement curdled in the pit of her stomach as she locked glances with Spock. The Vulcan scanned her face briefly, his eyes keen and probing. Then he and Marlena continued past her, heading across the corridor to the main room.

Shaken, Jenny stared after them. She mechanically raised her glass and took a large, burning gulp of her drink. That had been dreadful. Far, far worse than her long-ago run-in with Sarek and Amanda. *They* hadn't really been very much like their STAR TREK characters, and it had, on the whole, been pretty funny, particularly in retrospect.

But this was *Spock*. Jenny shivered and took another gulp of her drink. The last time she'd been the recipient of a look like that, she'd been in the reptile house at the Bronx Zoo. It was the same emotionless 'Is this edible?' study she'd seen in the flat eyes of the venomous snakes. It hadn't even held interest.

*Do you WANT him to be interested in you?* Jenny swallowed another mouthful of liquor and said, "God, no." That alien stare had held no emotion, or interest, or recognition.

"Sometimes it's difficult to believe my own stupidity," Jenny observed dispassionately. She lifted her glass again. It was empty. She set it down on the floor, and, drawn by an odd compulsion, followed Spock and Marlana back to the main room.

She stood in the archway, watching as they crossed the room. Their appearance had transformed the ballroom to a stage set.

Feeling remote and withdrawn, Jenny went to collect another drink. She ignored passersby and leaned against the wall, sipping the chilly liquid and scanning the room. She wasn't eager to see Port Admiral Spock again, but it was impossible to resist looking for him. *One run-in with a fictional character, and I'm ruined for the rest of the day*, she thought, twisting her mouth in an attempt at a grin.

She caught one more glimpse of Spock, her eyes trapped by the flash of gold-black uniform. From a distance, his youth was hidden. Jenny stared, then quickly shut her eyes. *Oh, it's Spock, all right. You're so brilliant. What'd you do, Jenny, make up this whole thing just so you could meet Mirror-Spock? You're crazy, you know. It's all fake, all of it. It's not real; it won't be there when you open your eyes.*

Slair's voice interrupted her increasinlgy-panicky thoughts. "Jenny--" He broke off as she opened her eyes and turned, grateful for the familiar sound. "Jenny, what's the matter?"

"I think I've just seen a ghost." She intended her tone to be light. She was not successful.

Slair's eyebrows drew together slightly. He regarded her for a moment.

"I just saw Mr. Spock," Jenny explained, in determinedly cheerful tones. "And Marlana whatever her name is. Isn't that thrilling?"

"Port Admiral Spock? I didn't think he'd be here."

"Neither did I. *He's* the fictional character." Jenny was making an effort to work this out in an adult and reasonable manner. "*I'm* the real one. This whole setup has been rather long and involved for an insane fantasy."

Slair touched her arm. "If you must make remarks like that, use English."

"I did--" Jenny began, lifting her glass again. It was almost empty. Ah, that was a relief. Maybe she was just drunk. No wonder she was seeing things. She looked intently at Slair, who seemed oddly worried as he eyed her. *You made him up, too, Jenny.*

"Let's go home," she said abruptly. "Can we leave yet?"

She handed Slair her glass. He set it on the table. "Shortly," he said. "I wish to talk to the Admiral. Wait here."

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It was a relief when she finally walked into Slair's quarters. You couldn't feel vague about a desk you'd nearly broken your toes on once. The room's heat slowly drove out her chilled feeling.

Jenny stood in front of the dressing table in the bedroom, unhooked her heavy earrings, and set them with great care on the smooth dark wood. She put her hands to the clasp of the necklace. Her fingers wrapped around the jewelled band. "It's a collar." She yanked at the necklace.

"Yes." Slair's voice was slightly questioning. He had already removed his uniform sash and tunic and was pulling off his boots. He tossed the boots aside and came over to stand behind her. "Don't try to rip it off, merely because you're not sufficiently sober to manage the catch."

He unfastened the necklace, and then let his hands rest on her shoulders. Jenny set the necklace down on the dressing table with a sharp click.

Slair's fingers closed on her shoulders. Jenny put her hands up and laid them over his, pressing hard. His skin was hot on hers, his hands firm in their grip on her.

*This is real.* Jenny dropped her hands to her sides and turned to face Slair. She leaned against him, wrapping her arms around him and digging her fingers into his back to pull him even closer.

Slair slid his hands up her throat, tilting her head back. Jenny tightened her hold on him and watched his face through half-closed eyes as he traced her lips and eyebrows with his fingers.

He raised one hand to the jewelled pins confining her hair. One strand at a time, he slowly released her hair to fall over her shoulders and down her back, his fingers moving with leisurely care.

Jenny loosened her grip on Slair to run her hands up his chest and shoulders. Real-- Shaken by a surprising, intense sense of urgency, she laced her fingers behind his head and pulled his mouth down hard on hers.

As Slair shifted his touch from her hair to her shoulders, she twisted away, reaching up to yank the last pins from her hair. With trembling fingers, she began trying to undo the fastenings down the long sleeves of her dress. Slair regarded her with a faint smile and a quizzical lift of one eyebrow as he pulled off the rest of his uniform. She stared at him as she impatiently jerked at the buttons of her dress.

Slair tossed the rest of his clothing casually into the closet and came back to her. He began to help with the buttons. "Jenny--"

"Don't," she said. She almost ripped the dress off, heedless of whether the last buttons were fastened or not.

"Jenny?" Slair caught her hands. "Jenny, what is--"

"Don't," she repeated. "Don't talk. Oh, Slair, hold me. Hold me." *Hold me, make me real--*

An instant later his arms were around her, hard, hot, *safe*. Jenny was shaking again, but not too hard to press close to Slair and lift her mouth to be kissed. *Real, real . . .*

† † † † † †

"A transfer?" As the meaning sank in, Jenny bounced up from the couch and went to perch on the edge of his desk. "*When?* Oh--you said apply. . . ." Fleet Command probably wouldn't let him transfer.

"Oh, I'll be allowed to transfer--groundside," he said.

"Ah," said Jenny with comprehension. Not off the *Victory*. But off ships--that was another story. "But-- Slair, why?" She'd always thought he preferred the space work.

"I have been over two years on this ship, Jenny. Fleet Command will leave me here, serving len Ronan, until I rot--or transfer to port duty." He leaned back in his chair, face thoughtful. "When I saw the Admiral last week, it decided me. Even Spock, with all his mother's influence--" Slair shook his head.

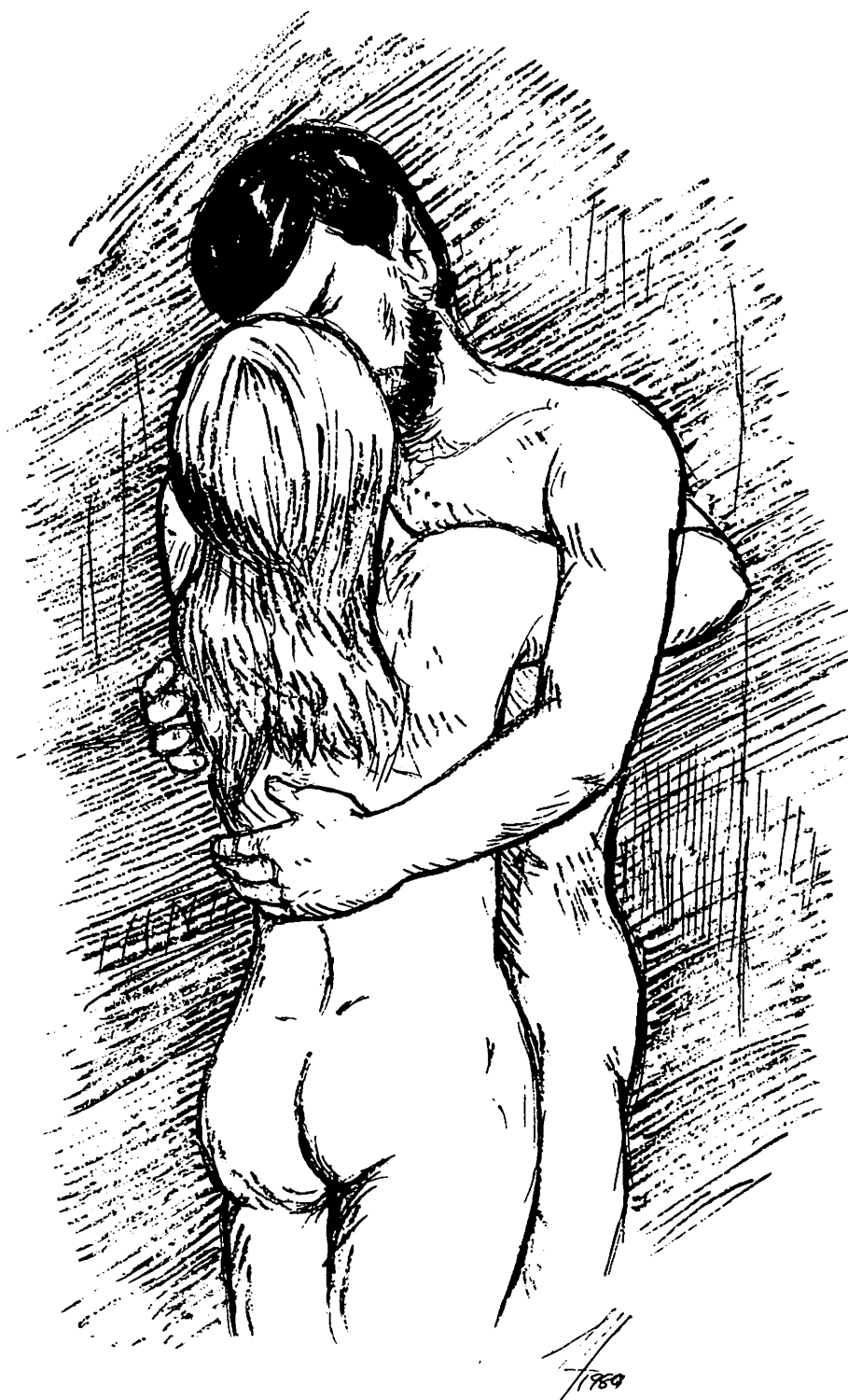
He had no need to say more. Jenny knew that for a Vulcan in Starfleet space service, the rule was *Thus far and no farther*. Even Spock had gotten no higher than first officer, ship command ever and always beyond his grasp.

"A request for transfer groundside will also let me purchase promotion," Slair added.

"Reassuring Fleet Command as to your innocent intentions?" Jenny said, grinning at him. "Cheer up--maybe you can get Nourin back."

Slair inclined his head. "It was one of the possibilities that had occurred to me. There would be other advantages. It would, in some ways, be extremely pleasant-- But I warn you, Jenny, nothing is yet settled."

Nothing was settled for so long that Jenny almost forgot about it. It would be truly charming, but the transfer began to seem an increasingly remote possibility.





"Needlework again?" said Slair as he and Tavra entered the cabin. "You must be desperate."

"I think the damn thing snarls on purpose, just to be annoying," Jenny said, glaring at the embroidery. "Hello, Tavra."

"Greetings, Jenny." Tavra followed Slair to the desk. "Well, Slair?"

Jenny dropped her tangle of embroidery on the couch and shot an uneasy, suspicious glance at Tavra. Slair's chief operative was rarely that informal--or that amiable.

Slair had inserted a bright yellow cassette into the desk viewer. "As you see." There was a real smile on his face as he scanned the tape.

Tavra studied the viewscreen. "Yes. Excellent."

"What's going on?" Jenny's voice was edged with tension. Things had been quite amazingly uneventful for at least two or three months, and she wanted them to stay that way. Then, as Slair turned to her, still smiling, she added quickly, "And do I want to know?"

"Yes. You'll like this, Jenny. My promotion and transfer have been approved."

She stared at him with swiftly rising joy. "The transfer? You mean we're getting off this ship? Oh, Slair, how wonderful! When? Soon?"

He shook his head. "Not for some months yet. It will depend on a number of circumstances. But I should be confirmed in rank before that."

"So I should hope," Tavra said caustically.

Ignoring Tavra, Jenny jumped to her feet and bobbed a mock-demure curtsy to Slair. "Congratulations, sir. What rank are you going to be now?"

"Commodore, Port Rank," he said. He looked down at the viewer again. "Now, Tavra--"

"A *commodore*?" said Jenny.

"One more word out of you, Jenny--" Slair said. The heavy menace was offset by the lift of his eyebrow and the curve of his mouth.

Jenny grinned and went over to stand beside him. "I suppose it *had* to be commodore?"

"I fail to understand what you find so amusing about that ranking," Tavra said. She subjected Jenny to a critical stare.

"It's just a good thing none of my fannish friends can see me now,

that's all I can say," Jenny said darkly. "I have my standards." She glanced at Tavra's face, grinned again, and added, "Low though they may be."

"Jenny," said Slair.

Obeying his unspoken 'Don't tease Tavra', Jenny switched back to the main point. "I probably lack moral character, but I don't care if you're a *double* commodore if it means we get off this ship. Where will--"

That is one of the matters still under negotiation," Slair said.

Well, wherever it was would have to be better than the *Victory*, if only for its omissions. No Captain Gellis len Ronan. Now that was a sweet, sweet thought.

The next two months seemed to drag. Eager anticipation had an odd effect on time. "Just what I always needed, a ninety-three hour day," Jenny said, yawning.

"Are you going to fall asleep again, Jenny?" Tenaya stopped contemplating the jury-rigged game board. "Are you all right?"

"I'm tired, that's all." Jenny plastered a look of wide-awake eagerness on her face.

Tenaya's attention went back to the game. "All right, and when the piece lands on this large corner square?"

"Do not pass *Go*, do not collect two hundred dollars--or whatever," Jenny said, stifling another yawn. "Tenna, I'm not really sure I know all the rules to Monopoly any more."

"That hasn't stopped you before," Tenaya said. "And then what?"

"Well, and then I *think* you--"

By the time Slair came in, Jenny was heartily tired of trying to stay awake and teach Tenaya Monopoly. She was less than delighted to discover that Slair planned to eat in the officers' dining room that evening.

"Nuts," she muttered as she pulled on the tabardlike ankle-length dress. She smoothed the silken bronze fabric and reached for the ornate belt that kept the dress's coverage at what passed for 'decent' in Imperial society.

"Jenny?" said Slair.

"Just a minute. I'm almost--" She broke off, frowning. What the hell--? She exhaled and tried again to hook the metal belt. It wouldn't. "Oh, *shit!*"

Slair turned to her. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said hastily. All right, then, she'd hook the damn belt on the next loop. But that five or ten pounds was going right back where it came from--fast. *Damn it, I haven't had to diet in--*

Well, it was a nasty shock, but all she needed to do was cut down on her food. If she skipped meals entirely for two or three days, that should do it, as it always had in the past. Slair was on late shift this week, so he wasn't apt to notice and insist she eat dinner.

*Boy, when I consider all that swimming--I'm only eating two meals a day as it is, damn it!* Sometimes life just didn't seem fair at all.

After a perfunctory examination and assorted pokings, Doctor Daliry stepped back and stared at Jenny. "Just to satisfy my professional curiosity, when did you last eat anything?" She sounded irritated.

"Yesterday," said Jenny defiantly. "Why?" She had the distinct feeling that Doctor Daliry disapproved of her. Doctors never did like it if you told them you were crash dieting.

"Yesterday. I see. Well, lady--"

"There isn't anything wrong, is there?" Jenny was privately convinced Tenaya had really overreacted. *Faint, my foot. I was just dizzy.* As she'd told Tenaya, *"Nobody faints anymore. What do you think this is, a Victorian novel?"*

Tenaya had not only not been amused, she'd insisted on dragging Jenny to sick bay, left Jenny to Doctor Daliry's tender mercies, and disappeared. If Tenaya were *that* worried, she could at least have waited.

"Wrong?" Doctor Daliry glanced at the readout chart in her hand. Then she looked back at Jenny. "There's nothing wrong with you except carelessness. You're pregnant."

"What?"

The doctor eyed her, then laughed. "So, I was right. You *didn't* know."

Jenny gripped the edge of the exam table with one hand and placed the other on her stomach. "But--but--" She took a deep breath. "How--"

"I'd say four and a half months, or thereabouts."

Jenny could only be thankful the doctor had misunderstood her question. "Four and a half months?" said Jenny. "But--but surely--I mean--"

"Possibly as far along as five months." Doctor Daliry eyed Jenny

with professional appraisal. "All things considered, including the slower development of-- Well, all I can say is, a full-human child would have been kicking your stomach out by now, and even you *might* have noticed *that*." She favored Jenny with a nasty smile.

"But I can't possibly be pregnant," Jenny said. "I mean--"

"Really?" said the doctor. "You know best about that, I suppose."

If Daliry didn't take that damn snide grin off her face-- Jenny drew another deep, calming breath. "Yes, but Doctor, Slair's not even my--"

"Oh?" said Doctor Daliry. "Then tell me, who's the fortunate father?"

"--species," Jenny said through gritted teeth.

The doctor shrugged ostentatiously. For some obscure reason, that was even more convincing than seeing the test results would have been.

*A baby. I'm going to have a baby. Ignoring the doctor, Jenny looked down at her hand resting on her stomach. I don't believe it. Surely I would have noticed? A BABY? Me?*

Doctor Daliry's voice interrupted Jenny's somewhat chaotic thoughts. "Well, lady, if you intend, for whatever peculiar reasons of your own, to take risks like that, you'll just have to scheme your own way out of the consequences. It's a little late for corrective measures. I warn you, I will not do it."

"What?" said Jenny. "Oh--no. No."

"In that case," said the doctor acidly, "stop starving yourself. Of all the ignorant, stupid--I only hope your daughter turns out to be smarter than you are. That wouldn't be difficult."

"Daughter?" said Jenny, fastening on the one non-insulting word. "You mean you can already tell? It's a girl?"

"Of course." Doctor Daliry sounded annoyed. "I ran the standard tests. Now see here, lady--"

"Doctor," said Jenny, "shut up."

A sour smile on her face, Doctor Daliry shrugged and turned away. Somewhat shocked by her own daring rudeness, Jenny slid down from the exam table and left sick bay. There were approximately six million questions she needed to ask, but not now.

Jenny spent the time waiting for Slair to show up alternately walking restlessly around the two rooms and sitting on the couch gnawing on her fingernails. If there was one thing she wasn't looking forward to, it was informing Slair that she was pregnant. There didn't seem to be any really

good way to announce this fact. God alone knew what he was going to say when she told him.

If there was another thing she wasn't looking forward to, it was being pregnant and having this baby. Assuming, of course, she could carry it to term.

"If you've gotten this far, I don't see *why* you shouldn't, so don't be stupider than you have to!" Jenny told herself loudly, and jumped up to circle the room again.

No matter what else happened, she could foresee nothing but trouble. As for the complications this would make in her reasonably placid life-- "Oh, shit," she said, and sat heavily on the couch, staring at the door.

As it turned out, she was spared the effort of telling Slair anything. When he entered the cabin, he strode over to her and pulled her to her feet.

"Slair--"

His gaze was intent and almost baffled. "Answer me this, Jenny. Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?"

Taken aback, Jenny completely lost her grip on calm. "I didn't notice. I mean-- How did you know?" Even as she asked, she realized that dear Tenaya must have waylaid him as he came off duty, and he'd gone to see the doctor for a report.

Slair ignored the question. "I fail to comprehend how a woman could 'not notice' that she was almost five months pregnant."

"Well, I didn't," Jenny said, on the defensive. "And I still don't believe it. Maybe the doctor was wrong."

"She wasn't," Slair said. "I suppose I should consider myself fortunate that your rather drastic system for dealing with a minor weight gain finally necessitated a visit to sick bay. Otherwise I presume you would never--"

"Oh, stop going all polysyllabic and acting as if it's all my fault. What possible reason could I have for thinking I was pregnant?"

Slair's expression relaxed. He raised one eyebrow slightly.

"Let me rephrase that," Jenny said hastily. "I thought cross-species pregnancies were almost impossible without artificial help. I sure as hell haven't been taking any fertility drugs!"

"You obviously weren't thinking at all. Why didn't you--"

"Precautions? Why didn't *you* think of it? Or *say* something?" Jenny said. She felt slightly bitter about this. "Why should I think about it after all this time?" She paused. "Slair, I--I'm not sure I want to have a baby."

"It is far too late for corrective measures," Slair pointed out with a complete lack of sympathy. The intercom buzzed for attention and he went to tap it. "Tavra? Enter."

"This should really stun her," Jenny commented as they waited for Tavra. "Slair, now what do--"

"Yes, Commander?" Tavra's expression and tone indicated only mild interest. She glanced from Slair to Jenny, and her expression stiffened. "There is some problem."

"Yes." Slair's mouth tightened.

"Well?" said Tavra after a moment.

Slair looked at Jenny. "Tavra," she said, "I'm pregnant."

"Unusual," Tavra said, disappointing Jenny by her lack of reaction. "The odds against such an occurrence are high. But surely a minor difficulty?"

Slair shook his head. "It is far too late for that."

"I see." Tavra's voice was even. She stared at Jenny. "May I enquire exactly how long?"

"Four and a half months?" Jenny offered.

"You are joking."

"Not this time," Slair said. He forestalled Tavra's obvious next question. "Because she didn't notice. That's why."

"Only you--" Tavra began, turning back to Jenny.

Jenny clenched her hands at her sides. "If just one more person says, 'But how could you not notice?', I'm going to do something violent. I wasn't getting sick. What the *hell* was I supposed to notice? You've both just said it's almost impossible without help."

"The operative word," said Slair, "is *almost*."

Jenny tugged sharply at the side of her dress and fought a sudden urge to burst into tears. "Notice what? It's only just starting to show, and with these clothes--half the current styles don't even *have* waists!"

Tavra did not look convinced. "Surely the interruption of the cycle typical of your species should have indicated--"

"My inferior species, you mean," Jenny snapped. "Well, it never *was* 'regular'. And it's even *less* regular now that I'm running all over the damned galaxy!"

"Quiet," said Slair. "Both of you." He nodded toward the table. "I suggest we all sit down. There are a number of matters that must be discussed. The travel arrangements, for one."

He and Tavra took seats at the table. Jenny remained standing.

"Travel arrangements?" she said.

"I'll have to send you home," Slair said.

"A glamorous warship being no place for a pregnant woman." Jenny's voice was oddly flat.

Slair looked at her sharply. "Jenny. Sit down."

He waited until she joined them at the table. After she slowly sat down, he said, "For one thing, you will require specialized medical attention. You have been exceedingly fortunate to have had no difficulties thus far." His voice hardened. "Especially considering your foolhardy--"

"I was trying to lose weight."

"You could have ruined your health."

Tavra tapped her fingers on the table. "In any case," she said, ignoring this side issue and dragging the conversation back to the main point with a cold determination that Jenny had to admire, "transport should prove simple to arrange. It is fortunate that we are only a few days from our stopover at Lusardi. Are you planning to have me escort her, or will you send for Sundaren?"

Slair looked at Jenny, his brows drawn together. "I shall have to consider the matter. One of our ships should be in the vicinity, which would be a decided advantage."

"I'll bet," Jenny muttered. Sending her home on a ship owned and operated by Slair's family business would be less nerve-racking for all concerned.

"In the meantime, I suggest that--" Tavra's suggestion, whatever it was, was interrupted by the buzz of the door intercom.

Slair rose and went over to the desk. "Yes?" His face hardened into the blank mask he usually wore only on duty. "Certainly, Captain."

Jenny exchanged a quick, startled glance with Tavra as Captain Ien Ronan entered. She could count the times she'd seen the captain in these rooms on the fingers of one hand. And she'd hated every one of them.

"Yes, Captain?" Slair's voice was civil, but hardly welcoming.

Captain Ien Ronan stopped in front of Slair. "I understand congratulations are in order, Commander."

"Indeed?" said Slair.

Len Ronan tilted his head to study Jenny. "Obviously you do something besides fight, after all."

"Oh, *no*," Jenny said soundlessly, observing the slow tensing of Slair's hand and facial muscles. How the hell had len Ronan found out so fast, anyway? *That damn doctor!*

"Your communications and information network is, as always, most efficient, Captain."

Len Ronan smiled. "Doctor Daliry has never been other than 'most efficient'. Nothing wrong with *her* judgment." After a brief, icy pause, he continued. "So, Commander, I suppose you'll be disposing of your lady, in one fashion or another."

Slair inclined his head in assent. "I shall send her home. Temporarily."

Surprise a little too evident on his face, len Ronan shook his head. "She must be a mine of well-hidden talents and charms."

"Unlike many, I see no point in change merely for the sake of novelty," said Slair.

"I see." This time len Ronan looked irritated. "In that case, Commander, I feel it even more incumbent upon me to remind you of a minor point. So minor, in fact, that I have the strange conviction it's slipped your mind."

"And that is?"

Len Ronan strode to the desk. He leaned back against it and hooked his hands on his glittering sash. "Of course, I may have been mistaken. Perhaps you've already chosen a replacement."

As the captain's meaning sunk in, Jenny shot a look at Slair. As his eyes met hers, she firmly quelled her first surge of anger. She was aided by a sharp nudge on her ankle from Tavra's foot. Tavra displayed no other sign of interest in the proceedings.

After the brief exchange of glances with Jenny, Slair said, "One officer's lady is perfectly adequate, and enough of an expense. I see no necessity for duplication. Jenny's absence will be for a limited time."

"A limited time. How limited?" Len Ronan's voice was mild.

"Six months, perhaps," Slair said. "And in any case, I will be--"

"Half a year, at least," the captain said, in the same gentle tone. "I see." He straightened, slowly. "Oh, no, Slair," he said softly. "Not this time. Your lady is supposed to be here, not halfway across the empire



having a baby. I don't give a damn how many women you keep at home. You're going to have at least one on board!"

"Captain, I do not believe that the matter--"

The captain slammed his hand on the desk. "Quiet, Commander! I have an excellent memory, and I retain vivid recollections of what happened the last time this question came up. I'm not going to have Fleet Command on my neck--not for you. You are going to maintain standards proper for an Imperial officer, whether you like it or not.

"And further more, I expect--no, I think I'm making it an order, Commander--that you will hire someone while we're in port at Lusardi." Len Ronan jerked his head in Jenny's direction. "When she walks off this ship, her replacement had better walk on. Go to an agency, if you have to. I won't put up with this 'We're in deep space and no one's available for the position' routine."

Len Ronan surveyed Slair with a look of grim satisfaction. "Easy, Commander," he said, as Slair's hand moved, almost involuntarily, to his knife. "I haven't made any mistakes. It would be a trifle awkward."

"For both of us, Captain." Slair's hand remained resting on the hilt of his dagger.

Len Ronan smiled, a wolflike flash of teeth. He moved toward the door, then paused by the table. Ignoring Tavra, he stood, hands on his hips, looking down at Jenny.

She didn't even try to meet his coldly sardonic eyes. She was so afraid of len Ronan it made her sick, and he knew it. She bent her head to stare at her tensed hands and shifted away in her chair.

The captain's hand darted out to grip her chin. Forcing her head back, he ostentatiously studied her face. Jenny jerked back, twisting free. Len Ronan laughed, shaking his head again, and turned to face Slair once more.

"When you finally have your amusing little companion back, you can toss her replacement down the antimatter tubes, for all I care. But you're going to *have* a replacement."

He moved to the door. There he paused once more. "You're not a portside commodore yet, Vulcan. While you're on my ship, Commander, you're going to abide by our customs, not yours." He stared hard at Slair for a moment before he left.

No one spoke until the door had been closed behind the captain for a full minute.

"What a charmer that man is," said Jenny, trying valiantly for a light note. "So easy to hate."

Slair's hand dropped from his knife. "True."

"He is, however, correct." Tavra, unobtrusive during the captain's visit, now pushed back her chair and stood. "So long as we are on this ship, Commander, he can insist, and he will."

Jenny took a deep breath and carefully uncurled her hands. Of course. Somebody had to display all that damn jewelry.

She looked up to see Slair's face taking on the set, super-Vulcan expression that meant he'd be damned if he'd be pushed around. She could see that Tavra also recognized it.

"Oh, no, Slair," Tavra said. "This time, I'm going to select someone."

"God alone knows what you'd pick up this time," Jenny finished under her breath, in English.

After a moment, Slair's face relaxed and he shrugged slightly. "Very well, Tavra. You see to it."

"Yes, sir." Tavra's relief and pleasure was too evident for Jenny's liking. "Under the circumstances, I believe it *will* be best to deal with an agency."

"I am not interested," said Slair flatly. "You handle the matter."

"Agency?" said Jenny. For some reason, the thought of an employment agency for officers' ladies struck her as riotously funny. "Hertz Rent-a-Lady!"

She received the blankest of looks from Slair and Tavra. "Of course Avis probably tries harder," she offered. She repeated, "Hertz Rent-a-Lady," and started to laugh.

"Will you confine yourself to some standard language?" said Slair. "Those remarks made no sense. As usual."

"Well, you see, back on Earth there's-- Oh, forget it." Jenny rubbed her eyes, which had developed an annoying tendency to tears.

Slair and Tavra moved to the desk. Slair touched the computer controls, and the two Vulcans studied the small viewscreen. From time to time, there was a brief discussion of ship locations.

Jenny remained seated, staring unseeing at her hands, her mouth tight. Every path her thoughts took led to topics she had no desire to contemplate. She began absently twisting the cat-ring around her finger.

"Jenny," Slair said.

She looked up. "What is it?"

Slair nodded to Tavra, who said, "It appears there will be one of our traders in port when we assume orbit around Lusardi. This will eliminate many of the difficulties involved."

"Amazing, considering the incredible inconvenience of events thus far," Slair commented.

Tavra nodded. "Yes. Otherwise, it would probably be necessary for me to--"

"Cheer up, Tavra." Jenny's voice was cold. She slowly rose to her feet. "You're getting what you've wanted for a long time, aren't you? Think how peaceful it will be for the next six months. And if you're *really* lucky, maybe I'll die in childbirth and solve all your problems."

Tavra looked somewhat taken aback, and exchanged a quick glance with Slair, whose brows drew together. "There is no reason for undue apprehension," Tavra said. "You will receive excellent care."

"I'll just bet," Jenny said, trying to keep her voice under stiff control.

"I assure you," Tavra began, "that you need have--"

"Will you *shut up*?" Jenny said desperately, and half-ran to the bedroom. She stopped just inside the bedroom. With a sense of strong frustration, she spun around to close the door.

Slair's hand closed over her wrist just before she touched the control. After her first startled jerk, Jenny kept her eyes fixed on the door controls.

There was a silence, then Slair said, "Since you have succumbed neither to malnutrition nor miscarriage, despite your experiment in starvation, I feel you have little cause for anxiety." There was another brief pause. "Your durability is remarkable."

"You're such a comfort," Jenny muttered. She slapped her free hand on the wall beside the controls. "The damn doors won't even *slam*."

"Some of them do at home," Slair said.

"Yes," said Jenny.

Slair released her wrist. "Now come back and sit down. You should hear this too."

Jenny reluctantly nodded and looked up, giving Slair a forced smile. "Yes. I'm sorry."

She followed him back and sat down again, trying to ignore Tavra's carefully blank expression. *I don't WANT to have a baby. I'm scared--* With an effort, she pushed down the thought, and kept her mind rigorously concentrated on the rest of the long discussion.

"Stop staring at yourself in the mirror," said Slair much later, as

they were preparing for bed. "You look no more pregnant than you did this morning before you discovered the fact."

Jenny abandoned her skeptical scrutiny of her figure. "I know, but I still expect to see a difference now that I know about it." She cast a last glance at the mirror and went over to the bed. "You know what's really strange?" she said, as she slid into bed beside Slair. "Already knowing I have a daughter. Months in advance."

"We have a daughter," Slair said. "I have every intention of acknowledging her. I want my children under my care."

The prospects his casual, if firm, statement opened up were truly hideous to contemplate. She wasn't sure what, if any, rights an officer's lady might have in this situation--damn few, she suspected. If Slair *didn't* choose to support her and a baby-- Jenny suddenly felt sick.

"Jenny?" Slair pushed himself to one elbow, looking at her disconcerted face. "You never thought of that." His voice was hard.

Jenny sighed and shrugged. "No. What a nasty thing to bring up. I really should learn that I can't trust you."

"You should." Slair looked down at her. "But you won't."

The lights out, Slair shifted to curve one arm over Jenny. She placed one hand on his arm and the other on her stomach. "Of all the things I never--" she began, half to herself.

"What?" said Slair.

"Oh, I was just thinking."

"No doubt."

"Of all the things I never expected to do, having a half-alien illegitimate child was pretty high on the list. So was--"

"Illegitimate?" Slair slapped her cheek, but softly. "I told you I was acknowledging her."

He sounded really offended, and Jenny was insensibly relieved.

"Sort of like--like Darkover," she said. What was that word? *Nedestro*?

"What? Shut up and go to sleep," said Slair.

Jenny settled down under his arm and closed her eyes. "It must make it easier to pick names," she said after several minutes. "Knowing the sex so far in advance, I mean." She hesitated, then said in tentative question, "I suppose that you--"

"You are her mother," Slair said. "It is your privilege. However, I impose one restriction."

"What's that?"

"You are *not* to name her 'Star Trek'."

"Believe me, I wouldn't dream of it." Jenny's voice was shaky with laughter.

Unfortunately, her amusement and relief rapidly wore off. Laughter gone, she lay staring into the dark, listening to Slair's slow, even breathing, her thoughts pulling her down into brooding depression.

*It isn't fair*, she thought. She'd achieved a stability and security, and she didn't need to have her contentment smashed by this practical joke of fate. Things had been perfectly all right as they were.

She shifted under the comforting heat of Slair's arm and wrapped her fingers around his. With her luck, she was probably going to be vilely ill from now on, with all sorts of rare and stupid complications. From what the doctor'd said, she was probably going to be pregnant for *longer* than nine months, too. She tightened her light grip on Slair's hand and leaned her cheek against his shoulder. *I bet I WILL die in childbirth*, she thought gloomily. *And--*

"And he'll refuse to gallop *ventre à terre* to your deathbed!" Jenny pulled away from Slair and spoke severely to herself in a vehement whisper. "*Honestly*, of all the--"

"Aren't you asleep yet?" Slair's arm held Jenny still. "Are you worrying about the unlikely possibility that--"

"I suspect that's the least of my worries." She twisted away from his touch and he removed his arm. "Slair--" She stopped, not sure what she had wanted to say.

After a moment of silence, the light glowed to its lowest setting. Propped on one arm, Slair looked over to Jenny. His brows were drawn together slightly. "Your apprehensions are unwarranted."

Jenny looked away into the dimness of the bedroom. "I don't see why you should be upset about it."

"You are causing me a great deal of inconvenience."

Jenny sat up, clasping her arms around her knees. "And you 'don't wish this arrangement to inconvenience you unduly'." She was unable to keep a certain amount of bitterness from her tone. "Sorry, Commander."

He lifted one eyebrow in slightly puzzled surprise. Then his face became totally impassive. "I do not appreciate being forced to disrupt perfectly satisfactory arrangements, even on a temporary basis."

"A change is always nice." Jenny was suddenly reminded of her mother's firm conviction that few things were so permanent as a 'temporary arrangement'. "Cheer up. Maybe you'll like my replacement better."

The words seemed to echo. Jenny's face took on a horrified expression as she looked at Slair. Then she dropped her head to her knees and closed her eyes. "Oh, shit." Her voice sounded very tired, even to herself.

"Jenny." There was an odd tone to Slair's voice.

"What?" she said ungraciously, voice muffled by her knees.

"Permit me to point out that *Tavra* will be selecting her."

"I know that." Jenny refused to look at him. *Tavra* would be sure to pick the perfect officer's lady: beautiful, useful, skilled in all the lethal arts. Not an 'adequate' looking woman. Not a mouse-meek coward.

Slair gave her hair a light tug. Jenny slowly lifted her head. The corner of his mouth was curved up. "And I sincerely doubt that *Tavra* will choose someone who knows such--intriguing--stories."

They stared at each other steadily. Slair tugged her hair softly again and raised one eyebrow. Slowly, almost unwillingly, Jenny smiled back.

"You'll just have to manage without me," she told him. Then the full beauty of the situation hit her. *Tavra* would pick Slair a normal lady, all right. And the first time *Tavra*, with almost two years of habit behind her, said, 'You shouldn't do that, lady', or 'The commander wouldn't like it'? Rent-a-lady wouldn't care for that, and furthermore, wouldn't stand for it.

"Oh, dear," said Jenny, amusement once more dancing in her eyes.

Slair's expression turned wary. "What is so amusing?"

And poor *Tavra* wouldn't be able to say a damn thing, because she'd have picked the lady out. A smile of pure malicious amusement lit Jenny's face. "Nothing. Just you wait, Henry Higgins."

"Sometimes I think you are completely deranged. Do I want an explanation of that cryptic remark?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Jenny said.

Slair gave her hair a third and much harder tug. "I do not intend to indulge in trivial conversation for the rest of the night. I will have a great deal of work tomorrow."

"Inconvenience?" said Jenny, putting her hand on his wrist.

Slair turned out the dim light. Then his arm circled Jenny's waist

and he pulled her down beside him. "For one thing, I must inform Sundaren immediately."

"Ha," said Jenny comprehensively.

"Tekitta and Semoran, however, should be ecstatic," Slair said, tightening his hold on her.

"I'll just bet. The doctors should have fun, too. I'm a laugh a minute."

"At least they will see that your diet is adequate."

Jenny sighed, and said with resignation, "You're not going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Not for several years, I should think. By then the memory of your idiocy should have faded somewhat." Now his voice carried overtones of amusement. "Although I doubt it will fade from Tavra's mind. She plainly wishes that--"

"Do you know something?" Pressed close to Slair, Jenny had a light-headed rush of assurance. "I don't care what Tavra wants."

"I do," Slair said. "Within limits, of course."

"That's why you kept me in the first place, wasn't it?" Jenny placed her hand on Slair's chest. "Because Tavra threatened to quit if you didn't."

Slair touched her cheek. "All things considered, it turned out remarkably well."

All things considered . . . Jenny shivered and slid her arm tightly around Slair, turning her face against his shoulder. 'All things considered' covered a lot of territory, some of it hellish.

"Jenny?" Slair ran a hand down her back.

But it was all right now. Jenny turned her head and relaxed her hold on Slair. "All things considered," she said slowly, "I'm really sorry about only two things."

"Those being?"

"My parents won't ever see their granddaughter." Not if they were lucky, they wouldn't. "And my friends. . . ." Her voice trailed off. That would always hurt.

"For that, there is no remedy," said Slair. "And the second?"

Jenny shook off nostalgic longing and settled more comfortably in his arms. "I *wish* I could be there to see the look on Sundaren's face when he opens that letter."





# Epilogue

Jenny

"Very bored, Jenny?" Slair, resplendent in his new uniform, had come up behind her.

As she turned to him, she caught a glimpse of a sleek, serene woman across the room. *I wish I were like that*, was her automatic, envious thought.

"Isabel?" Slair raised one eyebrow interrogatively.

"Sound asleep." Jenny smiled at him and accepted the glass he held out. Lifting the drink to her lips, she twisted for another look at that woman. "Slair, who is--" She froze, hand tightening on the cold glass.

It was a mirror.

